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Examining The Influence of Professional Learning Communities on Grit and Social-Emotional
Skill Development in Students and Collective Teacher Efficacy
Within a Middle School

Sam Kurtz

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program: National Louis University

Submitted in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

National College of Education

National Louis University

April, 2024

DISSERTATION

**Examining The Influence of Professional Learning
Communities on Grit and Social-Emotional Skill
Development in Students and Collective Teacher Efficacy
Within a Middle School**

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ABSTRACT

There has been a change in student behavior and social-emotional competence following the isolation, independence, and disjointed nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. Regardless of our efforts to engage students in learning, many are not emotionally available to participate in or avail themselves of the learning process. Through this study, I connected the potential development of collective teacher efficacy through utilizing a professional learning community (PLC) model, which focused on addressing students' lagging social-emotional skills in the middle school setting. This research aimed to determine if collective efficacy and PLCs with a central focus on social-emotional learning could yield growth in such student skills as perseverance and grit, collaboration, and communication. These findings, while inconclusive, provide a glimpse into the potential of this practice and may inform future decisions concerning planning for and prioritizing collaboration and commitment to explicitly instructing social-emotional skill development in adolescent learners. Immediate action must be taken to address our students' social-emotional needs. This research illuminated the potential of intentional, collaborative practices designed to foster students' development of social-emotional competency skills. Explicit instruction on the targeted student skills may yield gains in students' ability to navigate social-emotional challenges, and the impact on collective teacher efficacy is also promising.

PREFACE

District 1234's middle school is an exceptional place where I received my first post-college job as a sixth-grade science teacher in 2009 and spent seven incredible years serving the students of my community and learning from some of the most impressive and dedicated teachers I have had the privilege of working with. The principal at the time saw leadership potential in me and encouraged me to pursue an administrative career. During my time away from District 1234 professionally, I moved my family into the district so my children could benefit from the incredible education, even if I were no longer working there. After serving two other nearby communities over four years, that same District 1234 principal who began my leadership journey sought me out and suggested that I apply to be his successor following his retirement. I was fortunate enough to be chosen for the position and have proudly served my community ever since.

The children and families within our district are engaged, educated, kind, and collaborative. I have seen our students thrive in our school environment before the COVID-19 pandemic, and I have seen them flounder emotionally following the traumatic few years. The uncertainty of scheduling, operations, and safety during that time, coupled with the reduced socializing with peers, has led to significant increases in students reporting feelings and thoughts of self-harm, depression, and anxiety. Our students deserve a safe and secure learning environment where they can feel comfortable with who they are and focus on exploring their interests and learning new skills. I began this research to spark a solution and expedite the social-emotional growth in our students, fostering in them the tools and confidence to be themselves and navigate the stresses that typically accompany adolescence. Middle school is

hard enough on students, and trying to cope with social and academic pressures without the proper skills only exacerbates the emotional impact of this developmental age.

Engaging in this research experience has allowed me to formally explore relevant past research and build off related studies outlining the potential impacts of professional learning communities (PLCs) and collective teacher efficacy (CTE) on students' social-emotional development. I have found through my research that there is a gap in the existing literature around the implementation and impact of PLCs on social-emotional growth. I feel exhilarated by the potential for further study of how to best employ such practices to benefit our students optimally.

Through my study, I installed a PLC system that engaged teachers in productive professional conversations around best practices for instructing social-emotional learning (SEL). I led a change initiative by navigating the trepidation of the staff as we developed a model to address this collaborative approach and ensured we followed the plan with fidelity. I demonstrated patience, listening, flexibility, care, understanding, and a student-centered mindset in empowering staff to build a model that met their needs and those of our students. I am proud of our staff for their incredible innovation and commitment to this work, and together, we established a new model for PLCs that we continue to implement with confidence and pride.

I hope that the encouraging results from this research will spark further research and curiosity around how to best support our students' SEL needs and equip teachers with the structures and tools to collaborate around best practices and effectively conduct lessons. This research spanned a semester and yielded encouraging results, demonstrating a potential impact on students and staff. A longitudinal study spanning years may be able to capture a complete picture of how PLCs can benefit students in SEL and shape a building culture by promoting CTE.

Whether further research is conducted or not, I hope this study has shed light on the need to prioritize SEL, as our students are desperate for the skills and self-confidence to conquer their challenges and overcome their insecurities. Closing the academic gaps left by the COVID-19 pandemic is vital, but it can only be accomplished after we first prepare students with the grit and confidence to avail themselves of the academic lessons in our classrooms.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As I complete my doctoral research process and reflect on my journey in education, I am overwhelmed by the good fortune and incredible support I have received. I am incredibly grateful for my wonderful parents, who have served as my moral compass, role models, therapists, and cheerleaders and who give so much of their energy to make sure I find joy and success in my life. They have paved the way for me to be where I am today and continue improving myself; for that, I am endlessly grateful.

Most of this dissertation was completed late at night, early in the morning, and on the weekends. Each time I left the house to confine myself in my office, I knew I was leaving my caring and supportive wife, Leora, and my adoring children. The burden this work has placed on my family is not lost on me, and I feel so lucky to have such a loving family cheering for me every step of the way. To my wife, thank you for essentially carrying the responsibility of a single parent for the past two to three years as I made progress toward this goal. Your selflessness and love propelled me to the finish line. To my kids, who are four and six at the time of completing this study, you are the greatest thing to have ever happened to your mother and me. Thank you for allowing me to miss your gymnastics and swimming lessons while I wrote this paper. You are my inspiration to achieve. I love you both.

While my name is most closely associated with this work, the accomplishment of completing this dissertation belongs equally to my family and team of supporters. Thank you all.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

District 1234 (pseudonym) consists of three schools, one middle school and two elementary schools, and is located in the Northern suburbs of Chicago. With a total population of 1,211 students and an average of twenty thousand dollars spent annually per pupil, District 1234 is a boutique district that is tailored to meet the needs of each student and stakeholder. This district's schools are regularly designated with an "Exemplary" distinction via the Illinois State Report Card, and in 2021, the middle school received the National Blue Ribbon Award for sustained academic excellence.

When exploring the district's diversity and demographics, of the 1,211 students enrolled in the district, 57% are white, 37% are Asian, 2.7% are Hispanic, and 1.4% are black. Three percent of our students are identified as low-income, and none are homeless. Eleven percent of students utilize an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and 7% are enrolled in our English Language Learners program.

District 1234 has demonstrated sustained achievement, with 1,100 students (85.5%) identified as gifted on the Illinois School Report Card. We consistently serve as a safe space promoting student learning, leadership, and care through our individualized learning focus, service learning projects, and community engagement opportunities. Across the district, 64% of students met or exceeded the standards on the Illinois Assessment of Readiness (IAR) for English Language Arts, compared to 31% in the state, and 72% met or exceeded the standards in Math, compared to 26% in the state. As such, District 1234 graduates 60% of its eighth grader students having already completed Algebra I, which is well above the state average of 29%.

Students and their social-emotional and academic well-being guide our work and are at the forefront of decisions. We serve an affluent, intelligent, well-educated, and invested community with caring, creative, and intrinsically motivated students. Many families share an expectation of high levels of academic achievement, and they willingly and graciously partner with us to support students with creative and innovative learning opportunities. The resources and connections offered through collaboration with our community allow for meaningful, real-world experiences that shape our students and push learning forward.

Our teachers are exceptional, and their commitment to our students and families and willingness to go above and beyond to differentiate and support our students' growth is inspiring. Consistent with District 1234's practice, teachers are valued stakeholders with an essential voice and contribute to the decision-making, problem-solving, and innovating processes. Of the 120 teachers employed by District 1234, 81% have obtained a master's degree or higher. We have a 91% retention rate and an 11:1 student-to-teacher ratio, compared to 87% and 17:1 ratio throughout Illinois. Our staff is 94.5% white, 4.7% Asian, and 0.8% black, with 88.4% female.

The community is very supportive of the academics, activities, and directions of the schools. Cemented within our culture is an understanding that decisions are made following deliberation and collaboration among stakeholders and that we move forward unified and with mutual trust and respect. The development of committees for community input, such as the Parent Teacher Advisory Council (PTAC), and the involvement and partnership of the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) have allowed our schools to consider various perspectives and progress with the community's support. As an example of this support, during the 2018-19 school year, a brand new middle school building was constructed. This new facility provides the staff and students with spaces and resources that align with our innovative practices that have

occurred for years. The facility boasts flexible learning capabilities with removable and transparent walls, two high school-sized gymnasiums, sound-proof recording studios with recording functionality, multiple presentation spaces with audio-visual capabilities, dry-erase boards on the walls throughout the hallways, and a cafetorium with impressive stage lighting and sound and an attached outdoor patio. Passing the referendum for this state-of-the-art facility was a team effort among all stakeholders, generating nearly 76% support.

Our Superintendent created District 1234's collaborative district vision with input from our Administrative Council, which included all of the administrators at the district and building levels. We spent time in leadership retreats and numerous council meetings discussing our values, what matters most, and why we exist. Together, we established the District Echo...

District 1234 exists to create a community that craves learning, fosters resiliency, and cares deeply for every child. We honor childhood and foster intellectual, physical, and social-emotional growth (District 1234 Website, 2023). Our values include: accepting responsibility for all students, maintaining strong relationships and collegiality, and implementing child-centric practices. We measure success by realizing our strategic objectives to create rich learning experiences and dynamic environments that promote and celebrate student growth; build a culture of innovation and prepare students to be productive global citizens; maintain a healthy, financially stable position; ensure facilities and systems contribute to an optimal educational experience; recruit, hire and retain the highest quality staff and provide coordinated professional development and establish and maintain continuous open exchanges of ideas and information with all stakeholders, both internal and external, to foster relationships, collaboration, and understanding among our entire learning community. Our Echo and our values

are continually communicated and revisited with teachers, students, and parents throughout the school year.

In addition to the district's vision and echo, the District 1234 administration collaborates with the School Board to establish annual goals of focus, which provides a foundation for building-based School Improvement Plans and professional development opportunities. The two goals for 2021-22 were to increase the district's capacity to systemically collaborate within grade-level teams to execute the cycle of continuous instructional improvement and to thoughtfully respond to the impact of COVID-19 on our stakeholders.

Following the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, informal and anecdotal data indicated that students at the middle school had suffered a significant loss concerning developing coping strategies and navigating social situations during the past few years of abnormal education and living conditions. Marc Brackett, the lead developer of RULER (an approach to social-emotional learning (SEL) through Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence), explains that support for SEL has never been more critical than it is following the disruptions and chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic (Maughan, 2020). To District 1234's credit, we remained committed and invested in our students throughout the move to remote learning. However, some students left the physical school building and were isolated from peers and friends for eighteen months or more. While the community feared a loss in academic performance, we noticed a drastic behavior change in our first year back from combining hybrid and fully remote school models in 2021-22 compared to typical peers of past classes. Brackett continues, "There's real anxiety around the coronavirus...And so now is when we have to really put our emotional intelligence to the test to achieve the outcomes that we want" (Maughan, 2020, p. 40). Students graduating eighth grade and preparing for high school demonstrated behaviors expected of a sixth grader, as it had been

two to three years since their last entirely typical school year. In partnership with the community, the school and district must address students' behaviors and improve their emotional intelligence to navigate stressful and challenging situations better.

The administration established its 2022-23 Board Goals in partnership with the Board of Education. One goal explicitly outlined the importance of "Fostering emotionally intelligent schools where students and staff feel safe to learn and perform at their best." Finn and Hess (2019) explain, "Sensibly configured, SEL should complement instruction in reading and math, as well as history, science, civics, literature, composition, and the arts." They continue, "...success at SEL must complement and buttress academic learning..." (p. 2). We needed to make social-emotional learning a component of everything we did, and the Board of Education and District Office had appropriately identified this need as one requiring immediate attention.

A second Board Goal for the 2022-23 school year was to "Increase District 1234's capacity to systematically collaborate within grade-level teams to execute the cycle of continuous instructional improvement." As the middle school's principal, I was charged with addressing this emphasis on focused growth and innovation of instructional practices. I elected to develop a model for implementing a Professional Learning Community (PLC) in which teachers collaborated to enhance their practice and improve student achievement, as no such system existed in our school at that time. DuFour et al. (2016) define PLCs as "An ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (p. 10). Through this model, teachers could utilize student data to analyze their practice to improve their craft intentionally. DuFour et al. (2016) write, "In order to ensure all students learn at high levels, educators must work collaboratively and take collective responsibility for the success of each student" (p. 12).

As one of the global leaders in PLC implementation, DuFour and his team were adamant that collective efficacy through PLCs could improve a building's learning culture and student outcomes.

With a need for rapid and significant growth in social-emotional skills, I analyzed the effectiveness of improving student SEL skills as a result of collective efficacy, the shared belief among staff that they and their colleagues could impact student achievement (Donohoo, 2017, p.3), through PLCs.

Purpose of the Program Evaluation

We piloted and led a new Professional Learning Community model at the middle school to develop collective efficacy and foster true collaboration among the staff. Donohoo defines collective efficacy as “The belief that, through collective actions, educators can influence student outcomes and improve student learning” (2020). One challenge with implementing PLCs at our middle school was that it was a relatively small school, and most teachers did not share common courses. For example, we had only one science and social studies teacher for each grade level. Therefore, we could not offer one of the guiding principles of the PLC model (common formative assessments) to enhance student academic achievement. In reviewing this challenge with my PLC development committee consisting of teachers from various grade levels and departments, we determined that the most immediate need, and the variable that transcended grade levels and departments, would be to focus our efforts on supporting students' social-emotional development. Social-emotional skills are “The process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy

for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (CASEL, 2022).

When we surveyed the staff to determine which social-emotional skill lagged most and needed to be highlighted across the building, the overwhelming response was grit and resilience. In fact, through this survey, we used two different Likert scales to identify the most inherent challenges we faced in students throughout the building, and the consistency in the results was staggering. Of forty-one responses, twenty-eight teachers indicated that “Learning from Mistakes and Failures (Progress, not Perfection)” was the most critical and significant deficit of the four choices needing addressing (Figure 1). Similarly, when responding to the second list of six skills, twenty-three responses listed “Problem Solving and Persevering” as the most dire need to guide our PLC work (Figure 2). We used the thorough research of profound educators such as the DuFours, Mattos, Eaker, Donohoo, and more to repurpose already established principles of PLCs designed to support student achievement to instead support growth outside of academics, focusing our efforts on developing students’ essential competency skills. Examples of such skills include critical thinking and problem-solving, agility, collaboration, initiative, communication, and imagination, as outlined by Wagner (2014).

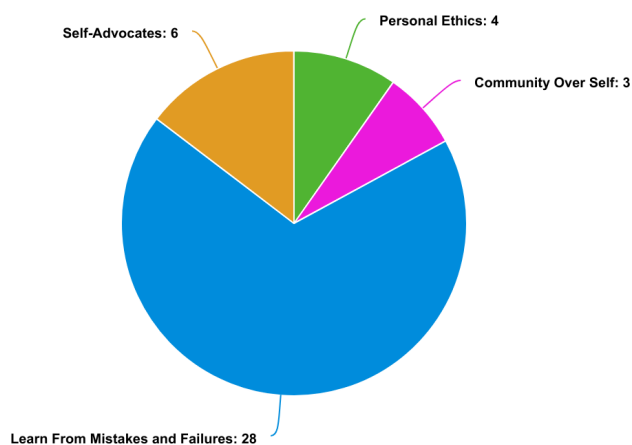


Figure 1. *Teacher Survey: SEL Skills*

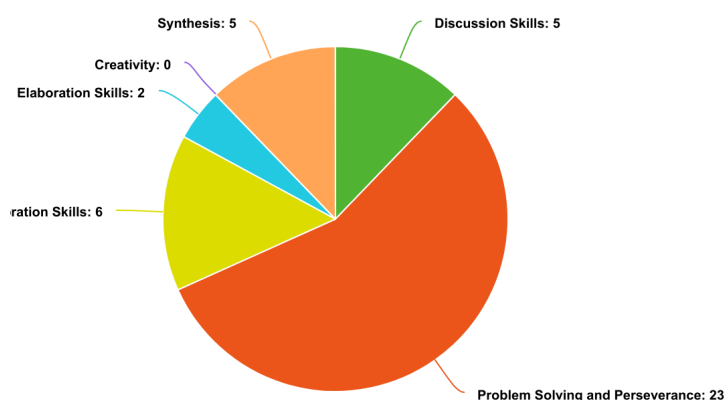


Figure 2. *Teacher Survey: Student Skills*

District 1234 prides itself on hiring highly qualified teachers deemed experts in their fields, and while PLCs were not specifically utilized to promote collaboration prior to this study, teachers had previously approached their colleagues to seek support and discuss their students' needs. Teachers met with their departments monthly to review their progress in delivering instruction and make recommendations for modifications for the future. As the teachers viewed themselves as experts, all collaboration around lesson planning and student growth had been initiated informally by the teachers during their plan periods, and rarely did these efforts utilize any data to articulate student needs or focus their efforts on how best to reach their students to optimize growth. Additionally, grade-level-specific teachers met weekly to discuss student behaviors and challenges to understand better how to meet a student's needs, but rarely did the conversation revolve around teacher practice. These conversations emphasized students' behavior patterns, not how teachers could better prepare, teach, or respond to student behaviors.

To remedy the lack of structure around collaboration and guide the opportunities for growth around teacher practice, the PLC development committee dedicated a year and a half of productive problem-solving to creating a meaningful and practical process to hold PLC meetings. In conjunction with a foundational pillar outlined by DuFour and DuFour (2012), our model addressed the four primary questions of a PLC:

1. What is it we want our students to know?
2. How will we know if our students are learning?
3. How will we respond when students do not learn?
4. How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient?

While generally promoted and practiced to achieve growth in academic skills, the PLC development committee utilized these questions to shape a model focused on improving SEL

skills at the middle school. These four guiding principles require that we collect student data to indicate achievement and progress and engage in conversations focused on addressing our teaching practice around these skills. Teams of four to eight department or grade-level colleagues met twice monthly to review SEL data relevant to and observed in their classroom. Teachers attended the meeting, having prepared in advance their observed data trend and an outline of strategies they had already attempted to remedy the unpreferred behavior.

When considering our model, a concern of the committee was that participating in a PLC with fidelity required courage and vulnerability. They wanted to ensure that staff did not feel judged or compared to others when identifying deficits in their class. A unique component of a PLC structured around a SEL goal is that these challenges could present in various ways (fixed mindset, behavior, preparedness, work completion, attendance, etc.). Therefore, each teacher shared unique situations with their team that may not have been observed in all other environments, thus creating a safer space to collaborate and brainstorm potential solutions without judgment. Additionally, although the data presented at a meeting would be specific to one teacher, the experience of navigating the observed trend would not necessarily be unique to only a few, and the suggestions offered would be relatable and valuable to many within the group.

After the presenter shared their data and attempted interventions, the group responded with compliments, wonderings, and suggested the next steps for the teacher to consider. As feedback was being shared, the presenting teacher would take notes on approaches relevant to students considered beginning, approaching, meeting, and exceeding expectations. By identifying strategies for each of these groups of students, the presenting teacher responded to the four critical questions of how to address this skill with each student in their class, regardless

of their proficiency. Following the meeting, the teacher explicitly implemented new approaches to teach this skill and recorded data to outline any progress or growth to share with the team as a celebration or follow-up at subsequent meetings.

In addition to creating a structure for teachers to meet, the PLC development committee also created presentations to be delivered by each homeroom teacher about the meaning and importance of grit, which were shared during homeroom classes throughout the building and at all grade levels. Following these presentations, students were asked to identify their self-perceived proficiency with grit by completing the Duckworth (2007) survey and answering a few reflective questions about whether their score was higher or lower than expected and whether it was fixed or could be developed. The survey utilized ten questions to assign a score of 1 to 5, with 5 representing the highest level of grit. Serving as archival data for this study, of 379 correctly entered student responses, the mean score was 3.46. To triangulate the data, we also sent the same Duckworth survey to our community parents/guardians to record how they perceive the grit of their students. This survey was optional, and therefore, we received only 80 responses. The mean score of this survey was 3.33.

Teachers in District 1234 wanted what was best for students, and they genuinely cared about the well-being of their students, but with the emphasis on academic achievement and stresses associated with garnering outstanding results, explicit instruction and support for student SEL development was limited. Additionally, teachers' skill sets in delivering this SEL instruction were unrefined as they were rarely practiced.

Hattie (2012) recommends that teachers meet every two to three weeks to analyze student performance, align their goals, discuss strategies for improvement, and create a plan to monitor student growth and the plan's effectiveness (p. 60). The proposed PLC model allowed teams of

educators teaching various grade levels and content areas to consistently meet every other week throughout the year to review student social and emotional performance aligned with the building's universal goal of enhancing grit. These meetings allowed teammates to analyze, compare, and interpret data collected to propose improved instructional practices to achieve better student outcomes. This proven philosophy to enhance student achievement in academics would hopefully expedite the growth in students' competency skill development and address the lagging skills caused by the ever-changing environment of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Demonstrated by the increased disciplinary challenges, increased school psychologist caseloads, and teacher feedback regarding student behavior in their classrooms, students were not exhibiting the maturity and socialization skills that previous classes had set as the norm. Student behaviors were inconsistent and unpredictable and demonstrated a lack of forethought, causing teachers to reassess their classroom expectations, as many students were not meeting the existing behavioral standards.

While the COVID-19 pandemic may have accentuated the need to focus on growing students' life skills, Wagner (2014) would argue that these skills are central to what students need to be successful in their adult lives, and they should have always been prioritized above much of the content that is heavily weighted in schools today. With this in mind, a PLC model in which social-emotional skill development is the focus and is explicitly taught could yield positive results impacting students' immediate future and make them serviceable, productive, and balanced in their careers and throughout adulthood.

As DuFour outlines, the difference between groups and teams is an interdependence on one another to achieve success. Similarly, Donohoo (2017), a leader in the field of collective efficacy, cites Hattie's work stating, "...collective efficacy and student achievement were strongly

related with an effect size of 1.57. According to the Visible Learning Research (Hattie, 2012), this is more than double the effect size of feedback” (p. 5). In his research, Hattie synthesized over 1,800 meta-analyses exploring 322 variables influencing the educational impact for millions of students across America. Of the hundreds of variables examined, collective efficacy is listed as one of the most positive factors influencing a student’s growth. His study demonstrates that growth of .40 standard deviations is equivalent to good teaching and likely to yield gains expected of one year’s worth of education. Any variable that surpasses .40 standard deviations would be deemed an above average or positively impactful tool for improving learning and a worthy and meaningful focus of time and energy, while anything measured to be less than .40 standard deviations is less impactful, possibly harmful, and not worth the energy required for its implementation.

An interdependence within this work was unavoidable as the social-emotional competency skills transcend all departments and grade levels. Through PLCs, we aimed to establish collective teacher efficacy with the entire staff committing to developing the established competency skills in our students. Each student became every teacher’s concern and responsibility, as one teacher’s success at effectively instructing these skills and promoting growth would impact the entire learning community. Not only would other teachers benefit from a student’s growth in the designated skills, but teachers would share and analyze data to determine best instructional practices, thus allowing other students to benefit from the same learning opportunities and bringing their refined skills into more classrooms.

The applied research of this study will determine the effectiveness of utilizing principles already established to impact student academic achievement to explicitly enhance social-emotional growth. Social-emotional learning is less tangible and concrete than academics,

and there is not always a single correct answer to solve challenging problems. This research aims to determine if collective efficacy and PLCs with a central focus on social-emotional learning can yield growth in such skills as perseverance and grit, collaboration, and communication.

Rationale

As Wagner (2014) outlines in his work, there is a “gap between what even our *best* suburban, urban, and rural public schools are teaching and testing versus what *all* students will need to succeed as learners, workers, and citizens in today’s global knowledge economy” (p. 8). This gap has only widened since the beginning of our crisis with the COVID-19 pandemic, and schools must focus their energy on rebuilding students’ foundational skills to ensure that they have the perseverance and social-emotional stability to navigate the challenges brought about by two years of worry, isolation, and educational insecurity. I believe schools did their best during this challenging time, but I imagine I would be met with minimal resistance when describing the two years of the pandemic as atypical and less than ideal for our students. We were faced with a significant challenge that needed to be overcome as efficiently and effectively as possible. Not only did we need to continue to adhere to the current content standards that Wagner argues are inappropriate and not the best gauge of student readiness to begin with, but we also needed to continue to hold our students to high expectations of achievement without them having the foundational skills they needed to succeed.

The European Commission’s Joint Research Centre Technical Report (2020) states, “...many students are likely to suffer from stress following COVID-19. They may have had little opportunities to play outside, and some of them might have seen their family members becoming ill” (p. 32). This pandemic has weighed heavily on our students. We were responsible for meeting them where they were and ensuring they were prepared for their future educational,

societal, and professional endeavors. We could not ignore the social-emotional competency skills that were lagging with solely a focus on academic achievement. Ignoring the root issues would lead to false narratives of students not achieving what previous students had, atypical and unacceptable behaviors in and out of classrooms, and a lack of connection with and investment in school and learning. Community members were looking to schools to close this gap, address the skill deficits, and put students back on a path to optimal success.

Professional Learning Communities provided teachers the focused collaboration and commitment to students' results needed to bolster collective teacher efficacy (CTE) and consider their collective impact on students, while also expediting student growth in SEL skills. If the desired results were achieved, this model could be replicated by other building administrators to develop valuable skills and competencies in students, while also placing emphasis on teacher collaboration and time spent on less concrete but just as critical instructional practices.

Many schools and teachers have curricular resources and materials already established to teach various academic units. Some curricula even contain scripts or guiding questions suggesting to teachers how to deliver the instruction to their students. We must commit more time to enhancing instruction around the less tangible material students are expected to learn through their educational careers. Developing social-emotional competency skills in students is just as important, if not more so, than the academic content receiving all our attention. We dedicate little or no energy to measuring our impact on developing students' soft skills, nor do we explicitly instruct these critical skills with any intention or consistency. Our students deserve better, and our communities expect better from our schools. If we agree that developing social-emotional competency skills is a critical outcome of school, we must commit ourselves to explicitly teaching these goals with the same fidelity that we do in our content areas.

Goals

This research aimed to highlight the elements of effective PLCs when applied to Social-Emotional Learning instruction. As was outlined earlier in reference to Hattie's research (2012), collective efficacy has one of the most significant effect sizes on student achievement. Therefore, the staff needed to unite and align their efforts to rebuild students' foundational skills quickly and effectively. If PLCs were the vehicle to foster such growth of social-emotional skill development, this model might prove to be the catalyst for prioritizing SEL skill development through intentional and explicit instruction, common assessments, data analysis, and collaboration.

DuFour and DuFour (2012) outline four primary student-centered and results-oriented questions guiding the work of a PLC. Specifically, the collaborative process is designed to support teachers as they determine what it is that they want their students to know, how they will know if their students are learning, how they will respond when students do not learn, and how they will enrich and extend the learning for those who are already proficient. These principles place students at the forefront of all discussions and planning, and they demand that teachers consider the needs of each student. Competency skills are the foundation to excel in rapid social, technological, and economic change. They are the core skills that help students adapt and acquire new knowledge as needed (Wagner, 2014, p. 267). Like content knowledge, these skills manifest differently in each student, and every student demonstrates various strengths and challenges. Through a collective approach in which all staff invested in each student's success, teachers would plan lessons explicitly addressing the targeted skills geared toward various types of learners at different levels of proficiency.

Through this research, I connected the potential impact of collective efficacy by utilizing a PLC model to address students' lagging social-emotional skills in the middle school setting. These findings may inform future decisions concerning planning for and prioritizing collaboration and commitment to explicitly instructing social-emotional skill development in adolescent learners. Administrators are eager to find effective strategies for addressing such skill growth, and the community can benefit from better-equipped adolescents.

Research Questions

The influence of collective efficacy through a PLC model can significantly impact student growth more than simply yielding academic gains. Therefore, the primary and secondary questions analyzed through this research were as follows:

Primary research question:

1. How do teachers apply the PLC format to discuss, plan for, and address students' lagging social-emotional skills?

Secondary research questions:

- A. How do PLCs promote collective teacher efficacy among staff?
- B. What links exist between the development of teacher collective efficacy and that of students' social-emotional skills?

Conclusion

Immediate action needed to be taken to address our students' needs, and I hope this research illuminated best practices for supporting students' development of social-emotional competency skills. Intentional instruction on the targeted competency skills yielded gains in students' ability to navigate social-emotional challenges. This research strictly highlighted work taking place in District 1234's middle school, a building serving sixth through eighth-grade

students, but results from this research may also inform best practices for building administrators in other districts. In the next chapter, I reviewed existing literature and research relevant to this study, collective efficacy, and PLCs.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of Literature

Introduction

As we emerge from our years of COVID-related practices, our students and staff have experienced trauma that has inevitably caused a delay and roadblock in students' emotional development. For the past two years, students have been shielded from in-person learning through virtual classrooms and screens, and their exposure to facial expressions and nonverbal cues has been limited as a result of masks. Whether or not you find these practices appropriate at the time is not the issue, but rather, we cannot assume that students will begin or continue learning at the same pace or meeting the same expectations as was the case prior to the pandemic. We must respond to our current reality and recognize that students need our support in navigating their emotional states to avail themselves of the academic rigor of our schools' high demands.

Effective teaching requires establishing positive and productive relationships that promote student engagement and investment in learning (Darling-Hammond, 2020). To achieve this, teachers must understand their students, meet each student at their ability and emotional level, collaborate with their colleagues to improve their practice, and unite to align efforts with a joint mission.

The typical middle school student attending District 1234 must navigate the expected challenges of early adolescence despite all the comforts and security our affluent and high-achieving community can provide. The social rollercoasters, the physical insecurities, and the emotional turmoil associated with middle school have plagued eleven to fourteen-year-olds for years, and District 1234 students are not immune. The COVID pandemic has only

exacerbated the anxious and depressive feelings, causing further frustration and confusion for our students to manage, yet the high-stakes testing and increasing workloads continue. Schooling must continue. Learning must not halt. In fact, the opposite must occur in which students need to catch up for the time and learning lost during the pandemic, increasing the demands and rate at which material is taught in an attempt to fill in any academic gaps. The anxiety from this cycle of desperation by educators to teach and students to learn three years' worth of material in a single year is harmful and impedes students' self-confidence, motivation, and vision of success.

Greene (2009) argues that students do well if they can, not if they want to, and if they could do well, they would. Students who appear unmotivated and disconnected or seeking attention and misbehaving may have an obstacle that is interfering with their ability to engage in learning. In District 1234, we find that undesirable and sometimes concerning student behaviors have increased since returning to a fully normalized school model. For context, the middle school in District 1234 made one call to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) between 2018 and 2020, the year and a half prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Through March of the 2022-23 school year, we have contacted DCFS five times. Similarly, from 2018 to 2020, we met with ten students regarding concerns about self-harm and to perform risk assessments for potential suicidal ideation. We have engaged in sixteen such risk assessments to ensure student safety through March of the 2022-23 school year. Lastly, our police liaison has been called four times to support struggling students during the 2022-23 school year compared to one time between 2018-2020.

It is clear that there is a change in behavior emerging from the isolation, independence, and disjointed nature of our response to the pandemic. Regardless of our efforts to engage students in learning, some are not responding. Greene (2009) would suggest that an underlying

cause is preventing them from participating in the learning process. Until this is resolved or addressed, these students will continue to struggle and disconnect from school. Our middle school staff identified a lack of grit in our students as the most prevalent and impactful lagging social-emotional skill and developed a unique model in which we utilized PLCs to explicitly address this challenge across all classrooms, allowing students to navigate hurdles, problem-solve more effectively, and re-engage in the learning process.

In alignment with Wagner's (2014) work, motivation to succeed and persevere through challenges is limited in today's youth, and many who participated in his research expressed concern about the decline in work ethic among young adolescents (p.167). Schools must be cognizant of and address student needs, not simply emphasize the importance of academic gains with blinders that ignore the other essential functions and benefits of schooling. Our middle school applied PLCs to address students' social-emotional preparedness, which aligns with Wagner's assertion that the lagging abilities students currently exhibit lie in competency and soft skills, not academics. This alternative approach to implementing PLCs prioritizes staff collaboration around analyzing social-emotional data and developing explicit instructional practices to empower students, promoting the skills they need to succeed and indirectly impacting their academic performance as they are more emotionally available to engage in the learning process. This differs from traditional PLC models in which staff analyzes student formative assessment data demonstrating academic growth and focuses a collaborative effort around improving academic scores and achievement. Wagner (2014) professes, "...Class time is narrowly focused on teaching only the skills and content that will be tested" (p.72). Grit is rarely directly assessed, as are most social-emotional skills, yet they are expected to be mastered and controlled so that teachers can progress through their curriculum. Teaching the entire child and

addressing their needs includes addressing their emotional regulation and coaching them through challenges to better equip them for future hurdles.

We can all remember a teacher who truly believed in our success and advocated for us to progress toward our goals. Effective teachers make all the difference for struggling students, and their belief in a student is powerful. The focused and unified belief of an entire staff convinced they could impact students' achievement is overwhelming to a school community. Donohoo (2017) states, "The strength of collective efficacy beliefs affects how school staffs tackle difficult challenges" (p.13). District 1234, and many districts across the country, are facing a difficult challenge in which school is expected to operate as it always has, but the participants in the learning, the students, have been drastically impacted by the pandemic's shutdowns and limitations. PLCs are generally designed to impact student growth, and our model is no different, but can they also impact teachers' perceptions of their impact on students? If a single collaborative initiative could reinforce students' lagging social-emotional skills, indirectly benefiting their ability to engage in learning and produce a teaming model that promotes and builds self-belief in a staff to accomplish a unified mission, it would likely be considered a valuable tool well worth its implementation.

This study's purpose is to outline the impact of a unique PLC model utilized in District 1234's middle school that explicitly focuses on the social-emotional needs of students as a tool to benefit student growth, specifically in grit, while also increasing collective teacher efficacy. The research presented in this literature review will outline the benefits to the school environment, students, and staff alike when collective efficacy is fostered, the need and urgency to focus on students' social-emotional learning in schools, and the collaborative philosophies and potential impact on student gains from an effectively implemented PLC.

Growing Collective Efficacy and Its Influence on Student Performance

What is Collective Efficacy?

Teaching is a challenging profession where the responsibility too often falls on a single individual to help dozens of students improve their academic performance and refine their behavior and social-emotional awareness. Teachers are expected to serve as educators, mentors, parents, nurses, psychologists, detectives, police officers, and more while being asked to respond to various circumstances, some of which may put one's safety in jeopardy. Families send their children to school expecting them to return home equipped with the knowledge and confidence to achieve their dreams, and teachers want that for their students, too. However, to bear this burden alone is too large a task, and the likelihood of achieving success for all students significantly diminishes compared to sharing this responsibility with a team.

Teachers approach their roles with a level of self-efficacy: a self-assessment of their ability to effectively teach the designated content within a certain environment and to a specific group of students (Goddard et al., 2000). Navigating all of the responsibilities associated with teaching requires confidence and competence. Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) suggest that teachers are not equally efficacious regardless of the teaching situation and that their self-assurance is context-specific. Teachers approach particular subjects, groups of students, and specific environments differently (p. 22). However, teachers placed in the appropriate setting and with the necessary tools and resources to succeed will self-reflect on their influence on the students and the school culture more positively. This concept was first documented by Bandura (1977), who examined how confidence in one's ability to perform at high levels directly correlated with greater success. We have all had teachers who were filled with enthusiasm and passion for their work, and thus, that individual made a lasting impact on our lives and helped us

reach our potential. Imagine a school where all teachers believe that they can make a positive impact on their students, and through social interactions, they believe that their colleagues can also impact their students. The energy and enthusiasm for teaching and learning will spread and thrive throughout the organization, and students will be the ultimate beneficiaries. Donohoo (2017) explains that collective efficacy refers to the shared belief among staff that they and their colleagues can impact student achievement (p.3). As with any example of co-workers or a sports team, shared belief that more significant successes can be achieved as a unified team often leads to more impressive results than working in isolation or lacking such confidence in oneself or teammates.

Donohoo et al. (2018) continue by expressing, “When educators share a sense of collective efficacy, school cultures tend to be characterized by beliefs that reflect high expectations for student success... Teachers and leaders believe that it is their fundamental task to evaluate the effect of their practice on students’ progress and achievement” (p. 5). Collaboration, specifically professional learning communities centered around a unified mission, is critical to a successful schooling model. From collaboration comes confidence and strategies that benefit all parties in achieving a collective goal. This literature review outlines the impact of collective efficacy on student achievement and defends the theory that genuine trust and conviction in one’s team to support one another can maximize teachers’ impact on student achievement. Furthermore, I suggest that collective efficacy can be fostered through improved collaborative models and teaming strategies. This supports the theory that enhanced PLCs, the current most effective collaborative approach, would positively influence CTE.

The Impact of Collective Teacher Efficacy on Staff and Students

An effective staff with a high level of CTE has the confidence to overcome challenges and persevere through frustrations, as they believe they can succeed. Kanter (2006) outlines various teams who conquered and succumbed to adversity in her literature, with self-efficacy being a significant factor in their outcome. Kanter explains, “Those who are convinced that they can be successful in carrying out the actions required for a successful outcome – who have “self-efficacy” – are likely to try harder and to persist longer when they face obstacles” (p. 39). There is no one-size-fits-all solution to being an effective teacher, just as there is no single best way to approach any challenge. However, without the conviction that the individual is capable of and committed to success, resigning to failure is a more likely outcome. When considering what that means for teaching, a lack of confidence in one’s self and colleagues can lead to a less effective school environment and lower student academic achievement.

Belief and confidence are potent tools, not only as influencers to motivate one’s self to perform at high levels but also to get the most out of others. Rosenthal and Jacobson (2003) conducted an experiment in 1965 in which teachers were told that specific students were projected to show unusually impressive intellectual gains during the school year according to a test that did not actually exist, and these students were randomly selected. The results after eight months in their classrooms showed that the identified students did demonstrate significantly greater gains than the other students in the class. While these students were not necessarily predictive of outstanding growth from a previous assessment, the teachers' belief that they could achieve substantial growth motivated a different approach, which led to more significant gains. Kanter (2006) explains, “Thinking that someone is a potential high performer encourages leaders and colleagues to ... invest more time, to pass on more tips, to find the positives that surely must

be there and mention them, ignoring the negatives because surely they cannot be true” (p. 40).

This self-fulfilling prophecy in which a teacher’s positive or negative beliefs impact a student’s performance is called the Pygmalion Effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 2003).

The cyclical process of perception, motivation, and action works as follows. A teacher’s belief in a student impacts their commitment to the student’s success, which is felt by the student and influences their self-efficacy. That sense of belief by the student leads to higher quality work, reinforcing the teacher’s belief in the student’s abilities. Conversely, a teacher who does not believe a student can achieve will dedicate less energy toward the student, harming the student’s self-perception and confidence, leading to lower quality work, just as the teacher suspected.

Drawing connections between the Pygmalion Effect and collective efficacy, Donohoo (2017) suggests that an efficacious teacher will convey high expectations to their students, promoting higher levels of growth throughout the class. Similarly, when school staff share a belief that they can accomplish significant tasks (CTE), they project high expectations on the student body, and significant growth occurs throughout the school. Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) further investigate this concept by explaining that a teacher’s self-efficacy impacts a student’s academic performance, motivation to learn, and sense of efficacy. It impacts the effort and energy they put into their profession, their goals for themselves and their students, and their desire to achieve their potential.

Efficacy has been linked to influencing several components of teacher performance, including classroom management. Teachers who perceive themselves as capable and competent in managing their students and classroom structures tend to have a more organized and high-functioning environment with students who behave more appropriately and productively. Gibbs and Powell (2011) state, “... If children perceive teachers as collectively and coherently

effective in managing behavior, ... we should expect children to have greater belief in their ability to manage their own behavior appropriately” (p. 4). Connecting back to the Pygmalion Effect, if teachers foster a classroom environment based on respect, inquiry, and collaboration built on pillars of kindness and trust, students will be more inclined to model their behavior after those principals and seek to achieve their potential in the class. Relying on consequences of removing students demonstrating poor behavior from the classroom sets the cycle in a negative direction, causing students to disengage from learning and teachers to lose confidence in their students’ potential and their personal skill set.

The evidence of collective efficacy impacting students’ achievement can be found in various research studies. Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) elaborate on Bandura’s (1997) research exploring an approach to measuring self-efficacy and identifying its impact on student achievement. Bandura outlines four factors influencing efficacy expectations: mastery, experiences, physiological and emotional states, vicarious experiences, and social persuasion. “Mastery experiences” refers to the concept that perceiving success from previous lessons will contribute to the expectation that the individual can find success again in future activities. “Vicarious experiences” connect an observer with a demonstrated model. Based on the confidence gained from the observation and the level at which the individual identifies with the sample, self-efficacy may be impacted. “Physiological and emotional cues” attribute one’s feelings of relaxation or anxiety in a given situation to their perception that they will succeed. “Social persuasion” is the impact of communication and communal interactions on an individual’s self-perception of their likelihood of success. Coaches may offer a pep talk during a game to encourage their players to perform at their potential. The players’ response to this

motivational speech and their rejuvenated belief that they can successfully accomplish the task is the impact of social persuasion on an individual's self-efficacy.

Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) build on those four variables and plug them into a cyclical model that outlines how teachers may interpret sources of efficacy to analyze their beliefs that they can successfully accomplish the teaching task and their confidence in doing so, thus evaluating their teacher efficacy (Figure 3). With this understanding of how they are approaching a specific task, there will be positive or negative consequences with regard to their goals, effort, perseverance, and approach, which in turn will influence their performance. The experience and reflection process will offer new inputs as sources of efficacy information, impacting their future approaches to similar or different tasks.

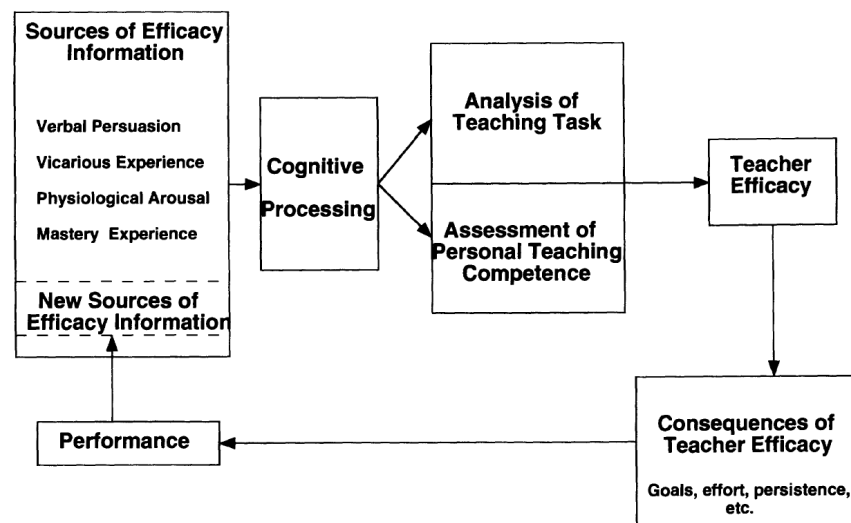


FIGURE 3. *The cyclical nature of teacher efficacy* (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998, p. 228)

Goddard et al. (2000) elaborate on Bandura's (1997) and Tschannen-Moran et al.'s (1998) research by exploring collective efficacy as a group-level attribute and the result of interactions and systems within an organization. Goddard et al. explain, "Analogous to self-efficacy,

collective efficacy is associated with the tasks, level of effort, persistence, shared thoughts, stress levels, and achievement of groups” (p. 482). They developed a 21-question instrument for teachers to measure their group competence and task analysis. Some statements from their survey that specifically relate to my study include, “Teachers here are confident they will be able to motivate their students,” “Teachers in the school are able to get through to the most difficult students,” and “Teachers in this school truly believe every child can learn.” This questionnaire was presented to 452 teachers across 47 different schools. This study confirmed a positive correlation between personal teacher efficacy aggregated at the school level and collective teacher efficacy, a positive correlation between trust in colleagues and collective teacher efficacy, and no statistical significance to the environmental demands placed on teachers as it pertains to collective teacher efficacy. Their study continued by expanding on the impact of collective teacher efficacy, seeking a correlation between CTE and student achievement. As predicted, their findings suggest that CTE’s impact on the behaviors within a school environment has a strong positive correlation with student academic performance in math and reading.

In 2001, Goddard expanded on his previous study, confirming that mastery experience, or one’s previous success practicing a particular task, is strongly related to collective efficacy, responsible for nearly two-thirds of the variance in collective efficacy between schools. Additionally, collective efficacy proved to have a strong and positive correlation with student performance between schools. Lastly, this secondary study determined that a group consensus about the meaning of collective efficacy was not nearly as impactful on student achievement as the mean collective teacher efficacy score identified through the study.

Further research was conducted in Virginia on the impact of collective teacher efficacy on student achievement in 2004 by Tschannen-Moran and Barr, who utilized a 12-item

questionnaire and their Standards of Learning (SOL) Tests. This new measure to determine the relationship between CTE and student achievement demonstrated similarly strong positive relationships between the teachers' belief that they can impact student learning and student performance on math, writing, and reading tests, consistent with previous studies. Specifically, collective teacher efficacy accounted for 14%-28% of the variance on the 8th-grade tests.

These studies confirm the theory presented by Hattie (2009) that collective efficacy is one of the most impactful variables in teaching that can influence student learning and achievement. Hattie set out to collect data on 357 different influences on student learning, measuring their impact and thus creating a hierarchy of where teachers should focus their energy to get the greatest results. Through a thorough review of over 800 meta-analyses, Hattie developed a continuum in which all studied variables can be weighed and compared. Using an effect size of $d = 1.0$, indicating one standard deviation increase in the results, each factor was scored. One standard deviation of growth was equivalent to improving the learning rate by 50% or demonstrating the growth of two to three years in a single year. Not all influences scored a positive score, or even a score of $d = .4$, representing the "hinge point" or expected growth that would promote one year of advancement and maintain an appropriate pace. Any factor that scores below $d = .4$ requires more consideration before implementation, as the cost of utilizing that approach will likely yield below-average gains compared to other strategies. Some variables that have the potential to accelerate student learning include the "Jigsaw Method" (1.20), "Timely Feedback" (0.89), and "Decreasing Disruptive Behavior" (0.82). Similarly, some variables that do not provide enough impact to promote expected growth include "Extracurricular Activities" (0.10) and "Homework" (0.29). Collective teacher efficacy's impact

on student achievement depicts a score of 1.34, the most positive influencer of the 357 factors studied (*The Visible Learning Research*, 2019).

Not only does collective teacher efficacy impact student achievement, but it also positively correlates with teachers' commitment to their profession. The quality of a teacher's work and commitment to their craft is related to their motivation to influence student learning. With self- and collective efficacy linked to student achievement, and the relationship between mastery experiences and collective efficacy, a staff with high collective efficacy would also benefit by being more committed to performing at their potential (Ware & Kitsantas, 2007). Additionally, the stress of teaching can become burdensome for staff and may cause early retirement or a lack of motivation to innovate and refine their practice. Student misbehavior is one of the most significant factors that can make teachers feel discouraged or helpless. Klassen's (2010) research on the impact of collective efficacy beliefs on teacher stress indicates that higher levels of collective efficacy alleviate the impact of student behavior on their job satisfaction. Teachers who believe that they are working together on a common goal as a united team can find joy and confidence in their work and collaborate with their colleagues to address student behavior concerns as they arise.

The value of collective efficacy on student learning and teacher satisfaction is undeniable and has been established by various researchers. "Given the fact that teachers' expectations powerfully influence student learning, coupled with the fact that teachers with a strong sense of efficacy convey high expectations while teachers with low efficacy beliefs convey low expectations, it makes sense to invest in fostering collective teacher efficacy as a school improvement strategy" (Donohoo, 2017, p. 20). So, how do we foster collective efficacy to reap the benefits of its influence on a school community?

How Can Collective Efficacy Be Fostered?

Collective teacher efficacy impacts student performance, teachers' perception of their value to the school environment, motivation to innovate and perform at their best, and teacher retention. With all these benefits for students and staff resulting from high levels of collective teacher efficacy, it seems crucial that administrators and teacher leaders learn how to develop and harness this property of the school culture. Donohoo et al. (2018) state, "The greatest power that principals have in schools is that they control the narrative of the school" (p. 44). Defining core values through a mission and vision that an entire staff can unite behind provides direction and clarity about who we are and what we strive to accomplish. With a common identity, the staff can begin reflecting on where they fit in the overall portrait of the school and align their practices to fit the community's needs.

An elementary school in Illinois struggled to support student achievement in the 1990s, with only 57% of students meeting or exceeding standards on the state assessment. The principal implemented several structural adjustments, including developing a School Leadership Team, and since 2002, the school has had at least 70% of its students meet or exceed standards in all subjects (Brinson & Steiner, 2007). Through productive data analysis as a leadership team, offering ongoing professional development to build instructional knowledge and skills, creating productive opportunities for teachers to collaborate, and involving teachers in school decision-making and initiatives, students began performing at a much higher level than previously. Fostering collective efficacy means establishing a community where people are valued for what they contribute and offering opportunities to unite around common goals.

Other school leaders, Navo and Savage (2021), reflected on their journeys to developing collective efficacy among staff in their districts. They identify various paradoxes that exist in

order to lead a building effectively, promote student learning, and facilitate CTE. Such balances include managing consistency and stability with an innovative approach to bring about change and inspiring confidence in one's abilities while being humble, approachable, and collaborative. Additionally, challenges can present as a leader navigates addressing issues directly and respectfully while also providing support for teachers to improve their craft and explore their potential. Lastly, being visible in a building is critical, but being overbearing can become intimidating and present as a lack of trust in a teacher's autonomy. Navo and Savage suggest that establishing collective efficacy is rooted in the culture developed within a school system. Reflecting on whether the teachers are clear of the building's purpose and contribute to achieving those goals, instilling belief and accountability in the stakeholders by empowering teachers' autonomy as they are encouraged to be instructional and operational leaders in the building, and revisiting the collaborative models to promote optimal opportunities for leadership and interactions among team members can help guide next steps as building leaders seek to promote enhanced CTE.

Tschannen-Moran and Barr have conducted qualitative research, later expanded upon by Nordick et al., to identify the variables principals can control to influence CTE. Specifically, principals can establish supportive relationships through clear and positive communication, meaningful collaboration opportunities, unity around common goals, and professional development experiences to enhance skills and knowledge (Nordick et al., 2019). This aligns with principles outlined by Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004), explaining the positive impact that principals have on a school environment when relationships are built on listening to teachers, sharing clear communication, and promoting innovative teaching, offering support and trust to implement such practices, and Donohoo (2017) reiterates that "change is dependent on

the relationships within it” (p.55). These administrative behaviors and strong and collaborative leadership approaches allow teachers to explore their profession with a desire and motivation to be their best, leading to increased confidence and better instruction, which benefits student performance.

Data indicates that increased teacher commitment results from being given opportunities to enlist the support of their principals, make meaningful contributions and decisions at their school, and exercise authority over their instructional approach (Ware & Kitsantas, 2007). If a teacher is asked why they pursued the profession, their likely response will incorporate making a difference in students’ lives with a focus on teaching meaningful lessons that will shape their adulthood and make them productive members of society. Allowing teachers the autonomy to perform the art of teaching with best practices learned through professional development and collaborative opportunities with colleagues promotes an environment where individuals are valued, and professionalism is harnessed. “The primary input is evidence of impact” (Donohoo et al., 2018). Allowing teachers the space to explore and refine their craft with the safety and trust to make mistakes while valuing their input and offering them leadership opportunities is the recipe for building self-confidence. As teachers build confidence in each other and support one another in achieving common goals, collective teacher efficacy grows.

Why Focus on Social-Emotional Learning?

What is SEL?

Middle school is a difficult time to be a student. Early adolescence is accompanied by physical changes, chemical imbalances, social hierarchies, and emotional challenges. As a result of these changes to routine and their biological makeup, evidence suggests that social and emotional competencies decline during adolescence (Green et al., 2021). Middle school

educators are responsible for supporting students as they navigate these unfamiliar obstacles while still trying to teach curricular material, attempting to maintain students' focus on academic growth and achievement despite all of the distractions. The emergence of social media as a primary platform for communication and the popularity of students owning personal electronic devices equipped with internet capabilities has caused the challenges of middle school, which used to remain in the building in previous generations, to follow students twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. The pressures of middle school are relentless, and young adults are regularly burdened by stress and anxiety in school as a result of their age and cognitive development. However, the added complications from the COVID-19 pandemic, where they were struggling to meet their basic needs, maintain their health, deal with a lack of connectivity with their school and social communities, and manage exhaustion from elevated worrying about their future, have only exacerbated the need for schools to support the social-emotional needs of our young adult students (Darling-Hammond, 2020).

Definition of SEL and Relevant Data

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as “an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young people acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (2022, para. 1). The character traits identified in this definition depict those of an individual who is likely successful and well-adapted, and able to navigate trauma, stress, friendships, and responsibilities effectively.

Teachers are responsible for preparing students for much more than simply knowledge regurgitation. Instead, students are expected to function in society with the skills, disposition, discipline, and strategies necessary to be successful as adults. We refer to guiding students to develop healthy relationships, demonstrate respect and dignity, think creatively and solve problems, and seek success as adults by teaching the “whole child” (Greenberg, 2023). Many states have adopted SEL standards to maintain a focus on this work and to outline the expectations for growth during a student’s education, indicating SEL’s importance in fostering a healthy and productive learning environment and promoting success in and out of school as adolescents and adults. McBride et al. (2016) researched the behavior of middle school students before and after participating in an immersive SEL program focused on service learning. The results indicated that students who participated in the SEL intervention were less likely to engage in behaviors that correlated with adverse academic and behavioral outcomes. As previously mentioned, student behavior and engagement in the learning process directly correlate with teachers’ CTE. SEL programs provide teachers with the structures and students with the guidance to regulate behaviors more effectively and appropriately, which allows teachers to build their confidence and collective efficacy beliefs, resulting in a more productive classroom environment that promotes higher levels of learning. Greene (2009) encourages teachers to support students as they navigate challenges and recognize that once overcome, the student will be available to focus on learning once again.

Data on adolescents in England reflects that 14.4% of adolescents aged 11-19 suffer from a mental illness, with anxiety and depression being the most prevalent, followed by behavior disorders (Clarke et al., 2021). Clarke et al. continue, identifying the most common age for developing a mental disorder to be 14.5 years old, which is during 8th grade for many of our

students, and longitudinal data reflects that students who do not address their mental or emotional disorders as children are more likely to struggle to find success personally and professionally as adults. Unfortunately, the already challenging time in a young adult's life, middle school, was only made more complicated by feelings of separation, isolation, confusion, and frustration from the COVID-19 pandemic.

District 1234 did everything it could to provide care and learning through the most challenging two-year period of my life. Regardless of the effort, the remote learning experience could only partially replace the benefits of interacting with friends, feeling the care of teachers, and practicing the social skills that need refinement. Timmons et al. (2021) conducted research on teacher and parent perspectives regarding how the pandemic affected their younger students. A common theme is that the students felt lonely during the remote learning experience, especially if they did not have a sibling. Additionally, not all families were able to offer the same support to their children depending on socio-economic status and the health and availability of parents. Similar results were found in Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi's (2021) study of the impact of COVID-19 on undergraduate students. Specifically, 67% of students responded to the survey that they worried about how the pandemic would affect their ability to engage in school remotely. When asked how they were dealing with the lockdown, 34% of students indicated that they genuinely struggled with little that could help them, and 35% stated that they felt overwhelmed but managed to persevere. Regardless of age, all students were impacted emotionally and socially with additional stress, anxiety, and separation as a result of the modified approach to school, and middle school students, who are already incredibly vulnerable, were no different.

The Center on Reinventing Public Education offered a reflection on the impact that the changes to education and routines during COVID-19 had on adolescents. Their findings indicate

that more than 1 in 7 young students reported experiencing a significant depressive episode in 2021. Furthermore, 70% of public schools reported that during the pandemic, the percentage of students requiring mental health support at school had increased. Lastly, According to the CDC's report, 57% of American teenage girls felt persistently sad or hopeless, with 30% seriously considering suicide (Gross & Hamilton, 2023). These statistics are staggering, and acknowledging that students are struggling to this extent, regardless of age, only reinforces the need for schools to accept this challenge and focus our efforts on meeting students where they are. If we accept Greene's (2009) premise that students do well if they can and not if they want to, we can interpret this data as evidence that students are not available for learning in the way they were before the pandemic. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, the impressionability of adolescents makes the middle school years an ideal time to intervene and teach social and emotional skills to promote resiliency and a more positive outcome for our students (Green et al., 2021). We must adjust our lens and practices to align with our students' needs.

How Schools Can Support Students

As students enter our schools and classrooms, teachers do their best to interpret the child's facial expressions and behaviors to determine their mood and draw assumptions about how to approach them. However, feelings are complex and multi-layered. We can feel overwhelmed with the day but smile because we just saw our friend. Many students struggle to identify or articulate their feelings because of the complicated social and emotional situations they constantly navigate that pull them in different directions, causing their emotions to change rapidly. Brackett (2019) suggests that we need to approach individuals as "emotion scientists" rather than "emotion judges." An emotion judge does not seek to understand but instead makes assumptions to justify behaviors. In contrast, an emotion scientist approaches students as

individuals, understanding that their presentation may be comparable or different to other classmates feeling similarly. Exercising this approach of seeking to understand allows questions to be asked, active listening to be practiced, support to be offered, and relationships to be formed between teachers and students, which can serve as a strong foundation when implementing SEL curricula.

With positive and trusting relationships established between teachers and students, teachers and school leaders can begin infusing an SEL curriculum into the fabric of the school environment with a focus on instilling productive and growth mindsets. Through the SEL lessons, students should begin developing a belief that they belong at school, valuing their work and perspectives as important, investing in their potential to improve their abilities, and gaining the confidence and self-efficacy needed to succeed (Darling-Hammond, 2020). But this transformational thinking and intrinsic motivation to be the best person they can be takes time to occur. School leaders must begin the journey by ensuring that school is a safe space for students to explore their identities and express themselves truthfully. Students who are comfortable with who they are and able to connect with others are less likely to engage in disruptive or disrespectful behaviors (Finn & Hess, 2019). In order to promote a safe space, the entire school must align to support SEL.

Teachers have proven to be effective facilitators of SEL curricula (Durlak et al., 2011), likely due to their relationships with students and the trusting classroom environments they foster. Implementing an explicit program where SEL skills are introduced and explored is critical to helping students understand their importance. Taking time from learning math and reading to prioritize how students are feeling sends a message of commitment to the work and demonstrates to students that these skills work in tandem with any aspirations they have for scholarly

achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2020). Teaching students how to recognize and manage their emotions, find support when needed, and resolve conflicts productively will contribute to a safe school environment and equip students with the tools they need to navigate complex social situations and succeed in school and life. Bracket et al. (2019) refer to these targeted and explicit programs as “kernels,” and while they are effective, they can present as overly scripted and lacking cultural and contextual relevance.

SEL programs are much more likely to be effective and lead to positive outcomes when implemented throughout the school and ingrained in all curricula and activities. With continuous access to mentors, students need to be exposed to SEL in all facets of their day, having the lessons embedded in curricular and extracurricular experiences (Clarke et al., 2021). Teachers need to infuse opportunities for collaboration, problem-solving, communication, and respectful discourse in all they do so students can practice and apply these skills. Brackett et al. (2019) propose that emotion should be at the heart of SEL, as these feelings contextualize how students interpret and respond to various social interactions. Allowing students opportunities to identify how they feel, understand why they feel this way, appropriately express how they feel, and offer time to regulate is foundational in understanding how to respond when a group member is not doing their share of the work or a friend sends a text message that is disappointing or disrespectful.

I propose that SEL, being so essential to a student’s success in and out of school, serves as an appropriate foundation for a school’s effort and focus. Developing strategies and opportunities to foster collective efficacy will encourage teachers to unite around this common goal of helping students develop these skills that will carry them through life. The enhanced

confidence in themselves and their colleagues to provide SEL instruction will increase their influence on their students and set them up for success in and out of the classroom.

Why prioritize grit?

Preparing students for success is a core responsibility of schools, and in today's climate following the COVID-19 pandemic, students are less prepared to achieve their goals than prior classes. Understanding and appropriately accessing emotions directly corresponds to students' academic engagement, work ethic, commitment, and general success (Durlak et al., 2011).

Therefore, to better equip our students to succeed, we must address their emotional regulation and ability to navigate challenging situations. It is clear from the District 1234 students' behavior that there has been a shift since utilizing a remote learning model during part of the 2019-2020 and the entirety of the 2020-2021 school years. When pressed as to what the most glaring change in students and impactful challenge facing teachers in the classroom is, the overwhelming response (28 of 41 responses) indicated that students are struggling to learn from mistakes and sustain engagement in long-term goals. Additionally, a second question clarified the challenge, with 23 of 41 responses identifying perseverance and problem-solving as the issue.

Consolidating these two clear responses into a single challenge with majority consent identifies the challenge facing teachers as a lack of grit in the students.

As defined by Duckworth et al. (2007), grit is the exhibition of "perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (p. 1087). Someone who possesses grit views obstacles as motivation to conquer new challenges and boredom as an opportunity to innovate their practice or approach. Grit is neither a trait people are born with nor cemented as a limited skill (Sui et al., 2021). It can be taught, practiced, and mastered, and as

previously stated, middle school is a perfect time to address SEL (Green et al., 2021) and this skill and its importance in future success in particular.

Duckworth et al. (2007) conducted research to determine the importance and influence of grit on an individual's success, posing the question, "Why do some individuals accomplish more than others of equal intelligence?" (p. 1087). As teachers, we see this regularly where two students who score similarly on assessments in class and seem of comparable intelligence perform very differently into their adult years and pursue completely different trajectories. A person's potential for success extends beyond academic knowledge or intelligence, which has been documented in research spanning over 100 years. Galton (1982) labeled those who were high achievers as being equipped with an "ability combined with zeal and with capacity for hard labour" (p. 33). Cox (1926) drew similar conclusions, suggesting that some traits identified during childhood were predictive of adult success. Specifically, the traits typical of successful people included "persistence of motive and effort, confidence in their abilities, and great strength or force of character" (p. 218). Bloom (1985) conducted a study on the most talented individuals and how they achieved such success. This research identified only a few of the 120 talented athletes, musicians, artists, and scholars as prodigies. Regardless of the field, the consensus was that for the majority to achieve great success in any craft required a motivation to accomplish mastery of the craft and a commitment to dedicate the time and effort required. Similarly, Winner (1996) explains, "Creators must be able to persist in the face of difficulty...Drive and energy in childhood are more predictive of success...than IQ" (p. 293).

These findings are consistent with Duckworth et al.'s (2007) research, indicating that grit plays a significant role in an individual's eventual success and that grit was far more responsible for the achievements of individuals studied than intelligence. Those who were identified as

grittier reached higher levels of education than those who lacked the perseverance and drive to pursue advanced degrees. Additionally, among students at an elite university, high GPAs were achieved by those with higher levels of grit, regardless of their SAT scores. In conjunction with support and partnership from home, it is the school's responsibility to instill a work ethic and develop stamina in our students so that they may accomplish their goals and dreams. Students have been removed from the classroom environment without direct oversight and support from teachers for an extended period. We must reacclimate them to the expectation that not everything will come quickly. Hard work, intrinsic motivation to achieve their goals, and a willingness to learn from struggles are required for their eventual success.

Impact of Professional Learning Communities

What are PLCs?

Ensuring academic, social, and emotional student growth is the primary responsibility of schools and the commitment our teachers dedicate their careers to achieving. Teaching is unpredictable, overwhelming, and frustrating while also being rewarding, inspiring, motivating, and the best and most important job in society. Teachers love the challenge of molding their students and witnessing the cognitive and behavioral changes that take place.

District 1234's middle school students, and students across the country and globe, require additional support as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and teachers cannot meet their needs working in isolation. Struggling to assist students without the support of colleagues will lead to diminished confidence and belief in their abilities, harming teachers' self-efficacy. Additionally, the challenging behaviors witnessed in classrooms are causing teachers to question if or how they can prepare their students for the future rigors that await them in more advanced classes and grade levels, which can impact students' self-efficacy as well, as outlined in the review of the

Pygmalion Effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 2003). High levels of efficacy inspire teachers to increase their expectations and promote higher levels of achievement (Donohoo, 2017). When teachers unite around these goals and develop confidence in each other, the efficacy becomes collective and far more impactful to the school's performance and growth.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are a form of professional development where teachers collaborate with their colleagues in an ongoing process of collective inquiry and action research to improve their practices and foster improved student outcomes (DuFour et al., 2016). Teachers engage in collaborative and reflective conversations through this teaming process, sharing ideas, strategies, and tools to inform future decisions about best instructional practices (Barr & Askill-Williams, 2020). Specifically, the current model of PLCs is built on three principles and asks team participants four questions.

First, all effective PLCs begin with an understanding that the fundamental purpose of school is to ensure that all students learn at their potential. To achieve this, teachers must engage in a collaborative culture in which there is collective responsibility and accountability. Teachers must recognize that each student's education and success is each teacher's responsibility and cause for celebration or concern. With this mindset, the PLC focuses on results, not intentions or excuses (DuFour et al., 2016). If the students are not performing as expected or at a high enough level, teachers should reflect and ask why that is the case, considering methods to revise their practice and adapt to better meet their students' needs. These three driving principles guide the work as teachers reflect on four critical questions. What do we want our students to learn? How will we know if they are learning? How will we respond when individual students do not learn? How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient? (DuFour & DuFour, 2012). There is no reason students should not be learning, whether they are exceeding, beginning

approaching, or meeting grade-level standards. This process puts the ownership of education on teachers to consider the needs of students and make adjustments as necessary, which is a task that is too immense to navigate independently.

While popular in today's educational vernacular, PLCs have not always been the common or popular approach to education. The term *Professional Learning Community* was first coined in the 1960s to deviate from the struggle of teachers working in isolation. In the 1980s, the concept began gaining more traction following more targeted research (*History of PLC | All Things PLC | Powered by Solution Tree, 2023*).

Early research on the impact of teacher collaboration indicated that students and teachers benefited from collaborative work around common goals. Rosenholtz (1985) states, "Effective schools... promote norms of continuous improvement. Here it is assumed that improvement of teaching is a collective rather than solo enterprise and that analysis, evaluation, and experimentation in concert with one's colleagues set the conditions under which teachers become more effective." Furthermore, workplace conditions were preferred and were perceived by staff to yield better results when teachers were given the opportunity to develop their professional practice with colleagues (Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1990). Further exploration by Little and McLaughlin found that effective schools promoted shared norms and beliefs, collegial relations, collaborative cultures, reflective practices, ongoing technical inquiry regarding effective practice, professional growth, mutual support, and mutual obligation (1993). Newman and Wehlage added that the most effective schools where student learning is most prevalent engaged their teachers in collective efforts to achieve a common purpose of student achievement through a collaborative culture (1995). This was followed up by reports that the most effective schools demonstrating the most impressive student outcomes modeled a professional learning community emphasizing

reflective communication, sharing instructional strategies, a unified goal, and shared values (Louis et al., 1995). Despite all of this research suggesting that PLCs were a valuable practice benefiting all stakeholders, they were not widely utilized in schools until the modern model was first presented by DuFour and Eaker in 1998. They proposed that high-functioning PLCs encourage their members to engage in six characteristics and mindsets: “1) shared mission, vision, and values, 2) collective inquiry, 3) collaborative teams, 4) action orientation and experimentation, 5) continuous improvement and 6) results orientation” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 25). Effective professional development is ongoing, collective, job-embedded, and results-oriented (DuFour, 2014). This brings us to modern times, where the PLC concept is widely regarded as a productive, beneficial, and necessary component to schools seeking to promote effective professional development, implement proven collaboration models, and improve student achievement.

How PLCs Are Used Effectively

PLCs function as an ongoing and collaborative model for professional development among teachers to align and utilize the best instructional practices to enhance student performance. The issues facing District 1234 following the COVID-19 pandemic are student misbehavior and lack of motivation, which is unusual for this school community. I propose that the PLC model can be effectively implemented to benefit SEL, just as it has been modeled for academic growth. Designing a model following the six guiding characteristics, four critical questions, and three main ideas, I anticipate that teachers will find success uniting around the identified challenge, a lack of grit among students, and experience improved student performance as a result.

Barr and Askill-Williams (2020) modeled PLCs being used to influence teachers' epistemic cognition about self-regulated learning. Their research utilized PLCs to implement six 40-minute sessions over twelve weeks, during which the teachers would reflect on their practices and perceptions of how their students received them. The report found the PLCs to yield positive outcomes as the method enhanced how teachers viewed this approach to instruction. This study shows that PLCs do not strictly need to rely on data from common formative assessments, but rather qualitative or quantitative student performance data can inform teacher decisions. PLCs allow teachers to engage in collaborative and reflective conversations, sharing ideas, practices, and resources and drawing on their experiences with students to inform future decisions about best practices (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). I predict that allowing my teachers the time and structure to reflect on student data relevant to how grit, or a lack of grit, is presented in their classrooms with the intention of developing new approaches to meeting the students' needs will yield positive outcomes.

Teaching is more than simply delivering content from the adults to the students through lessons and assessing the knowledge students have retained through tests. Teaching is all-encompassing, requiring attention and flexibility to adjust according to students' academic, social, and emotional needs, and leaves a lasting impression on students when done effectively. Students need to know that teachers care about them as individuals and genuinely want them to achieve success. Fostering success requires intentionally structuring our teaching to promote grit among the students. DuFour and Mattos (2013) suggest that establishing a collaborative culture with a collective responsibility for growth is the most powerful strategy for improving teaching and learning. As teachers record data about their observations of students' grit, they will present their findings and attempted strategies to their colleagues for their reflections and suggestions to

modify their practice and address students more effectively. Collectively, the team will benefit from supporting each other as they share students throughout the school day, and developing grit in students will allow them to be more successful throughout the school day and beyond.

Focused opportunities for teachers to collaborate have been proven to positively influence teachers' efficacy (Goddard et al., 2015). Engaging with colleagues to have in-depth conversations about how to improve grit may increase the confidence that teachers have in one another and, therefore, strengthen their commitment to their goal, increasing the level of CTE throughout the school.

Fostering grit in our students will require intentional approaches and instructional practices that are infused into all avenues of the school environment. It will take a concerted effort by all teachers for students to grow their skills. PLCs are designed to provide ongoing professional development around a common goal, utilizing student data to inform teachers' practices. This method is well-documented as being effective in promoting student academic achievement, and these principles may lead to a productive approach to fostering SEL. If effective, this mode of collaboration may bring the entire teaching team together in a more unified and confident environment.

Conclusion

The intended purpose of this literature review is to outline the importance of prioritizing the social-emotional well-being of students, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, explain the value of fostering collective efficacy in students and teachers as a means of improving student performance and behavior, and creating a more effective, fulfilling, and enjoyable work environment for staff. I propose that PLCs can serve as the vehicle to deliver on both of these needs. While not exhaustive, thorough research has been conducted without direct

links connecting PLCs as a tool to enhance SEL. I will apply the guiding ideas, questions, characteristics, and mindsets of the PLC model outlined by DuFour and his colleagues to implement a collaborative and unified approach to developing grit among District 1234's middle school students. I predict that an additional outcome of this enhanced collaborative model will be improved student behavior and performance, resulting in increased self- and collective teacher efficacy. The next chapter outlines my methodology for conducting my research.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Research Design Overview

Patton (2022) outlines the importance of implementing a Utilization-Focused Evaluation model to engage in deep and meaningful research that benefits the stakeholders and informs decision-making. To most appropriately and efficiently apply findings from research, the stakeholders involved and affected by the study must be involved in the process from the beginning. Specifically, Patton (2022) explains, “People use evaluation, not programs, not organizations, and not institutions” (p. 21). Without the understanding that this study is intended to improve quality and performance for real people, students and faculty members, the influence of the findings will be limited, and the implementation of any change will be inauthentic and lack commitment.

In this study, I investigated the influence of professional learning communities (PLCs) on students’ development of social-emotional skills, mainly as they manifest as demonstrations of grit or perseverance. Concurrently, this study also sought to reveal any influence on collective teacher efficacy (CTE) from practicing PLCs every two weeks. The stakeholders in this study included students and teachers, and as such, both offered feedback on the impact of PLCs on the dependent variables (grit and CTE). Additionally, DuFour (2016) outlines that PLCs may cause anxiety in teachers as the data shared may expose weaknesses in their instructional practices and make them appear inadequate. This anticipated concern became abundantly clear as the PLC committee charged with developing a collaboration model to enhance explicit social-emotional learning instruction influencing students’ grit began discussing how data would be collected and presented at these collaboration meetings. The thought of using student data collected through

common assessments to guide teacher practices drew explicit worries of comparison, evaluation, and feelings of inferiority or embarrassment. Offering space for safe discussions to explore and navigate these concerns was critical in moving past the fear and eventually developing a model that allows data collection with less risk-taking. After over a year of preparations, the model for PLCs was ready for initial implementation, and stakeholders were actively involved in ensuring its influence and designing its practice. Following the study, students and teachers had an opportunity to offer feedback as students reflected on their development in the area of grit, and teachers considered the influence of PLCs on their instructional practice and beliefs about effective collaboration.

Through surveys, focus groups, and observations, this study relied on a mixed-methods approach to determine if this PLC model influenced social-emotional learning in students and collective teacher efficacy in staff.

Participants

Students

The participants for this study included the 379 sixth through eighth-grade students, ranging in age from 11 to 14, who completed the Duckworth grit survey (2007) in their homeroom class as an archival data point in the fall of 2022, and we revisited this survey as a form of post-assessment data in the spring of 2023. The school gave the survey as an opportunity for students to self-reflect on their growth in grit, and this study utilized it to measure the impact of the PLCs. This survey would have been issued regardless of this study's research. Of the students who participated in the Fall, forty-nine percent were male, and fifty-one percent were female. Both data points were collected within the same school year, making the data collected reflective of the same student body sample. A stratified random sampling (Patton, 1990) of about

twelve participating students in total, four to six students from sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, were selected to offer qualitative feedback through a focus group aimed at articulating observed differences in teacher practice and student performance as a result of the PLCs explicitly emphasizing grit (Appendix G). With access to our student database, I used student identification numbers and a random generator to select the student sample from each grade level. These focus groups occurred during each grade level's lunch period, as holding student meetings with the principal during lunch is a common practice and a comfortable and familiar model to the students. Given that the PLCs will begin in the winter of 2023, all students selected to engage in these focus groups were able to compare their experiences before and after implementing the new collaborative model.

Parents/Guardians

Interested parents and guardians were given an opportunity to complete the same Duckworth grit survey (2022) as the students during the same timeline, both the Fall and Spring implementations, as they reflected on the perceived skill set of their particular student(s). Since the survey was optional for parents and guardians to complete, the sample of responses represented a random collection of students from District 1234's sixth through eighth grades with various ability levels, experiences, and backgrounds.

Staff

All forty-one middle school teachers of students in District 1234 engaged in PLCs. Therefore, they participated in Goddard et al.'s (2000) collective efficacy scale survey (Appendix B) as a pre- and post-assessment in the winter and spring of 2023. This survey presented a Likert scale from one to six, with strongly disagree and strongly agree serving as the extreme responses for each of the twenty-one questions. Each question had a possible maximum score of 174, with

the higher scores representing a higher collective efficacy. The sum of the scores can reach a maximum of 1890, which can then be averaged to achieve the collective efficacy score for the school. Questions asked in this survey addressed teachers' beliefs about student performance, school support, and teacher mindsets and effectiveness. The staff participating in this survey comprise fifteen percent male and eighty-five percent female teachers, with ninety-three percent being white and six percent Asian. Among the staff, eighty-one percent of the teachers possess a Master's degree or higher, and the retention rate is nearly ninety percent. Similar to the students, a stratified random sampling of six to nine teachers from different grade levels and departments were selected to participate in a focus group to offer qualitative feedback on their experience collaborating through a PLC model and the perceived impact it has on students' grit and collective teacher efficacy among the staff (Appendix F).

Data Gathering Techniques

This research utilized a mixed methods approach incorporating qualitative and quantitative data analysis. Patton (2022) suggests a shift in thinking concerning the evaluative process in which a focus on thoughtfulness and reflection should be prioritized over procedures and limited rules for analysis. Through qualitative and quantitative data triangulation, I adhered to Patton's philosophy of a thorough, reliable, flexible, and reflective process. In order to gather my data, I conducted surveys with students, guardians, and faculty, led focus groups of students and teachers, and personally recorded observations of the PLC model.

Surveys

To begin the 2022 school year, students received the Duckworth "Grit" survey (2007) to gather baseline data on how they felt they were performing within the lens of demonstrating grit (Appendix A). As Duckworth et al. (2007) outline in their reflections, "Grit is passion and

perseverance for long-term goals” (p.1087) This survey asked the participant ten questions, allowing the individual to self-reflect on how they responded to challenges, how they approached tasks, and how driven they were to achieve their goals. These questions were presented within two fundamental components of grit: an individual’s consistency of interests and their perseverance of effort (Duckworth et al., 2007). Duckworth’s research suggested that grit may be as essential, if not more so, of a determinant as intelligence when predicting an individual’s future success. To demonstrate grit is to focus on a vision that drives your motivation for success. Regardless of the challenges, the energy put toward achieving the goal is unrelenting, leading individuals to continue progressing through the hurdles. Grit has historically not been explicitly taught within District 1234’s middle school curriculum. Before taking the initial survey, students were introduced to the concept of grit with an orientation presentation outlining its meaning and how it manifests. While some had heard the word before, many struggled to define or express how it may be observed or developed. This survey was conducted in a homeroom class, so all present students (n=379) provided this information.

The same survey and supplemental information about grit was issued to guardians to understand how their student(s) exhibits grit from their perspective. The survey was sent to families through our digital newsletter with supplemental information about grit, its definition, and our goal for this year of improving this skill through explicit instruction. As it was not a requirement, we received a significantly smaller number of responses (n=80) than students in our building. All this information offers insight into our starting line regarding grit and allows us to structure our PLC model to address the shortcomings. This same survey was issued to students and guardians as formal data for this research study using the same structure in the spring of 2023.

To help indicate any impact on collective teacher efficacy, the Goddard et al. (2000) “CE-Scale” survey was conducted just before our PLC practice began in the winter of 2023 during a faculty meeting. I delayed the start of the faculty meeting to allow staff dedicated time at the beginning of the meeting to complete the survey, which I hoped allowed for more authentic results without the frustration associated with teachers needing to find time to complete the task. Additionally, I shared the survey with the staff via email with instructions as to how to access and complete the survey, and I intentionally was not present while staff recorded their responses so as not to influence any results. After implementing the PLC structure in our teams and departments for three to four months, the same survey was given to the staff to measure any change in results.

Both of these surveys are proven to be reliable and valid. Duckworth et al.’s (2007) research used this survey to successfully isolate the grit variable from intelligence and other personality traits when measuring factors relating to an individual’s success. While limited in its ability to compare one individual’s grit to another, this survey did effectively collect self-reflection data and triangulate self-perceptions with those of the students’ guardians. Similarly, Goddard et al.’s survey was first piloted in their 2000 study, during which the twenty-one question survey successfully measured the collective efficacy of the participants. Together, these tools offered quantitative data to this study through specific and outlined scoring systems demonstrating any impact on these dependent variables during the three-month pilot of the PLC model.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted in the spring of 2023 to gather qualitative data from students on their perception of changes in grit and whether teachers exhibited any observable

changes in practice due to their collaboration in PLCs. Similarly, focus groups with teachers allowed for their perspectives on the PLC structure to be shared and whether a perceived change in student grit was noticed as a result of the explicit instruction. Teachers were also asked to share their thoughts on the collaborative process, their views on their impact as teachers, and their interdependence with colleagues through this new approach to collaboration.

Questions for these focus groups were pre-determined prior to meeting with stakeholders and were delivered by me. The focus groups followed a semistructured model in which the questions were prepared in advance, but there was space for probing questions and clarification. As the facilitator of the focus groups, I was charged with managing the pacing while balancing my curiosity by diving deeper into follow-up questions with a need to maintain momentum in the group's discussion and offer all members the opportunity to share their thoughts (James et al., 2008).

Observations

Teachers participated in PLCs through their grade-level teams or content-based departments, depending on their shared planning time. As a result, teams varied in size between four and eight members. Each PLC met once every two weeks, and I completed a form during observations with outlined qualities and topics to look at and listen for. I acknowledge that observations are subject to the researcher's interpretation; however, the consistency and duration of the data collection process proved valuable in determining if the PLCs were conducted with fidelity and if the conversations were productive (James et al., 2008). I utilized member checking to minimize researcher bias and allow for a more comfortable experience for the teacher participants. The staff was permitted to request a review of the data before its use in the study. As

outlined by Birt et al. (2016), “Member checking is used to validate, verify, or assess the trustworthiness of qualitative results” (p. 1802).

The observation data offered qualitative and quantitative value, as some components of the observations focused on summarizing discussions and problem-solving approaches implemented during the meeting. In contrast, other components of the observations used a number to quantify the value of the work being completed as a measure of its effectiveness and productivity. Specifically, I used a Likert scale of one to five to indicate if I strongly agreed or disagreed that the presenting teacher received valuable feedback to develop a plan to meet students’ needs. As stated by James et al. (2008), “[Observations] develop ... trend analysis by measuring the same phenomena over time” (p. 75). I gathered data on change and outline patterns over more than thirty meetings by conducting two observations per month for three months for each of the six teams (Appendix H).

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the expectations of conducting research with human subjects and was sensitive to the potential areas of concern for the various stakeholders. Before collecting any student data, information regarding this study, its purpose, and the process was sent home to parents and guardians for review. As the engaged students ranged in age from eleven to fourteen, parent or guardian permission through an informed consent form was needed for participation in the focus groups. Additionally, students were given an assent form and asked to sign to confirm that they knew the study’s purpose and understood that there were no obligations to contribute to this study through participation in the focus groups.

All involvement in this research was voluntary, and detailed information was shared with students and guardians outlining that participating or electing not to participate in this study

would not impact any benefits for or perceptions of the students or families. Also included in this study's description was an outline of each stakeholder's confidentiality rights. The guardians and students easily understood all consent forms, as they were written in common and age-appropriate language with minimal education-specific terminology.

Teachers also received consent forms to participate in the focus group component of the study, and they could elect not to complete the collective teacher efficacy survey without consequence or penalty. As participation in the PLC process is a component of their job responsibilities, teachers were not able to opt out of that collaborative structure. However, detailed information was shared with them to explain my purpose in observing the PLCs and outline that the data collected would not impact their job security or be used against them in evaluations.

The participating teachers were members of my school's staff. Therefore, it was imperative that they understood that their involvement in this study would not influence my perception of them positively or negatively. Their authentic feedback and engagement would be a priority; therefore, clear descriptions and norms needed to be established. I leaned on established relationships of trust and respect that have been developed over eleven years working with many of my teachers to open dialogue around the research I was conducting. Additionally, I was very transparent with the PLT committee about my intentions to collect data on the work we were preparing to begin. Prior to beginning this research, I discussed my plans with our district's Association President to ensure her comfort with how the research and data would be managed. She fully supported the research, and she assisted me in communicating the intentions and plans for the findings with her colleagues. The confidence and faith that the teachers had in me to compartmentalize my roles as researcher and principal speak volumes to our positive

relationships and the high quality teachers at my school who are genuinely invested in participating in meaningful work to improve their craft and benefit students.

Any observations and responses in focus groups were to be kept anonymous and confidential to protect the identity of the participants. I also allowed teachers to review my notes if they were concerned about or interested in the data collected. All data collected was presented in aggregate, and personal identities and indicators were removed to protect participant confidentiality.

Participation in the study by guardians, students, and teachers could yield benefits for each stakeholder group along with the school, district, and impacted administrators. Understanding how to address the significant social-emotional skill deficit and emphasizing the importance of fostering grit in middle school students would assist students in developing the skillset needed for success beyond middle school. Additionally, families could engage in conversations with their student(s) around our school's goal and raise awareness of its importance, which may allow for long-term effects of evolving student and family priorities. Furthermore, teachers benefited from participating in this study as reflecting on the PLC model promoted professional growth through conversations around strategies for expediting social-emotional gains in students through explicit instruction and impact their beliefs in their impact as a teacher to influence their students and school environment through collective and interdependent collaboration. The school and district benefited from this study as it reinforced the PLC model and its influence on teachers and students, which could lead to further modifications to enhance the practice. All administrators impacted within the district and exposed to this study are better informed of the breadth of a PLC's impact and encouraged to reflect on their practices to expedite students' social-emotional learning.

Data Analysis

My data analysis aligns with the constructivist theoretical framework, as I utilized the data collected to interpret the value and influence of a PLC through the lens of both students and teachers. The survey data helped identify themes in thinking from stakeholders, and it also provided a score to quantify either a teacher's perspective of collective efficacy or a student's self-reflection of their grit and assisted in measuring any potential change in performance or perspectives. All focus groups had their responses transcribed, and those detailed ledgers of our conversations were coded to offer the qualitative input needed to help interpret the survey scores. Lastly, the observations of PLC meetings were reviewed to ensure that the model was being conducted with fidelity and allowed for justification and an explanation for the results from surveys and focus groups. The triangulation of data through mixed methodology helped to enhance the validity of results and develop a more accurate and complete depiction of the influence of PLCs on social-emotional learning and collective teacher efficacy.

Conclusion

Patton (2022) states, "... the essential criteria for making design decisions are practical, contextually responsive, and consequential" (p.10). In alignment with Patton's outline of the core components of utilization-focused evaluations, this study was designed with input from stakeholders to benefit the stakeholders. This study allowed for a determination of proof of concept and indicated whether this unique model for PLCs impacted students' social-emotional learning and teachers' collective efficacy despite the short window for data collection. Both dependent variables take time for substantial change to occur, so the potential change observed did not yield significant impacts. However, further research is justified and encouraged due to

the observed data and changes. The next chapter outlines this study's findings and dissects the qualitative and quantitative data collected from the surveys, focus groups, and observations.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Introduction

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, middle school students' social-emotional needs within District 1234 have been exacerbated, requiring teachers, school psychologists, and building leaders to search for methods to support them best. To expedite the development of social-emotional skills in middle school students, my school has developed a model of professional learning communities (PLCs) to specifically gather student data to inform teachers' practices and address their lagging skills. This study has been designed to investigate the relationships between the implemented PLC model and social-emotional growth in students, specifically centered around the emergence of grit. In an effort to triangulate data using Duckworth's (2007) "Grit Scale" survey for students and parents, along with observational data of the PLC conversations and focus groups consisting of students in 6th, 7th, and 8th grade and teachers, this study intends to identify any correlation between students' demonstration of grit and the newly designed and implemented PLC model.

In addition, the PLC model asks teachers to take risks, be vulnerable within a group setting of their colleagues, and accept feedback to improve their practice. Requiring teachers to communicate about challenges observed in their classrooms and offer strategies to refine colleagues' practices may offer an opportunity to improve the building culture, enhance collegiality between co-workers, and establish a collaborative model built on trust and a collective interest in improving student performance, regardless of if students are in a particular teacher's class or not. Therefore, this study also seeks to identify any correlation between the established PLC model and fostering a building environment of improved collective efficacy

among the staff through the data collected from teacher focus groups, observations of the PLC meetings, and Goddard et al.'s (2000) twenty-one question "Collective Efficacy Scale."

Findings

Utilizing quantitative and qualitative measures, students, families, and staff offered insight into the impact of the implemented PLC model on students' grit and teachers' collective efficacy. In each meeting, teachers utilized a PLC structure in which one or two teachers presented qualitative or quantitative observations from their classroom demonstrating students' lack of grit. Once presented, these observations are followed up by colleagues responding to what they are impressed by, suggestions or questions, and ideas for the following steps to address the observed issue. This system was designed and refined over eighteen months beginning in August 2021, and its implementation began in February 2023. The PLC structure was conducted from February 2023 through May 2023.

PLC Team	Number of Participants	Number of Meetings Observed
Sixth Grade	10	3
Seventh Grade	13	3
Eighth Grade	9	3
Creative Arts	9	3
Physical Education & Health	6	5
World Language	6	4

FIGURE 4. *PLC Meeting Data*

Teachers met in their grade-level teams or content department teams once every two weeks, depending on their availability of shared planning time within the schedule. There were six teams in total: sixth grade, seventh grade, eighth grade, World Language, Physical Education and Health, and Creative Arts. These meetings were opportunities to share data, explore and suggest strategies, and offer updates regarding the impact of previous meetings' collaborative work. In fact, one specific component that the design committee wanted to prioritize in the process was celebrating successes as a team and recognizing the hard work of each team member. In total, twenty-one meetings were observed and documented by the researcher (Figure 4). Of those meetings, the first six were initial PLC meetings where celebrations of previous work could not be celebrated. Of the remaining fifteen observed meetings, teachers began by celebrating observed successes and student growth in the targeted area eleven times (73%) for an average of 3.9 minutes to begin each meeting. Teachers shared experiences implementing ideas offered during the meeting and having students improve in that area. For example, one eighth-grade teacher found that students were leaving to use the restroom at an increased rate when an assessment was about to occur. Teachers suggested using brain breaks more routinely in class to allow students to get energized for their assessment and get their blood pumping. The importance of the routine would allow students to anticipate that this would be available to them before an assessment, rather than being nervous about when they would have the opportunity to get focused for their test. After two weeks of implementing this new strategy, the teacher reported a drastically decreased rate of students leaving their classroom for the restroom. Another teacher celebrated her newfound success in motivating students to attend class fully prepared with homework and materials with an incentive program in which a letter of "GRIT" is

spelled on the board each day the entire class is ready by the starting bell. Once “GRIT” is spelled out entirely, there is a class celebration.

All members of the teams share these celebrations because implementing such strategies would not lead to student success without the commitment of the team to engage in the collaborative process and suggest innovative approaches to challenges. While the primary focus of the PLC was to review data to intentionally enhance teacher practices resulting in improved student grit, a different potential outcome being studied in this research is whether this process for analyzing and planning for social-emotional learning could enhance collective teacher efficacy.

During my observations, the PLC meetings were managed by the grade-level leader or department chair, implemented with fidelity, and operated with a genuine intention to improve student experiences and outcomes. Meetings lasted about forty minutes, and the topics of challenges ranged from a lack of student stamina in the classroom environment, students struggling to maintain focus during activities, encouraging students to adopt a growth mindset and view learning as a process that they can manage, and empowering students to understand and utilize their specified educational plans, among others. Each challenge focuses on developing student grit and is centered around the child’s needs. The conversations were rich with ideas from the teams, which ranged in size from 3 to 13 members and averaged 7.3 teachers in a group. Across the twenty-one meetings, all involved staff members participated by either sharing their data or offering suggestions, and each data presentation received an average participation rate of 93% from staff in attendance contributing with feedback, solutions, or ideas. This observational data collected by the observer via a prompted Google Form illustrates how these meetings were taken seriously by the participants, implemented with fidelity, and were genuinely

collaborative experiences for our staff to reflect on their practices and consider new approaches to address observed challenges.

Grit

As an initial measure of baseline student grit data, all sixth through eighth-grade students in the assessed middle school in District 1234 were given a ten-question Duckworth (2007) survey to report their self-perceived level of grit. This survey was issued in late August, during the first week of school. Each description of grit was offered on a Likert scale of 1-5, with responses ranging from “Very much like me” to “Not like me at all.” Three hundred eighty-five students completed the initial survey with a mean score of 3.46. Students were instructed to submit their scores and answer a supplemental question, “Do you see your grittiness as fixed or able to be changed?” To this question, 57 students (14.8%) responded that their grittiness is changeable, 290 students (75.3%) offered that their grittiness is somewhat fixed but able to be developed, and 38 students (9.9%) believe their level of grit is entirely fixed.

To corroborate students’ self-perceptions of their grit, we issued the same ten-question Duckworth survey to families. As this was not distributed in a controlled setting, we received 80 responses, in contrast to the 385 responses submitted by the students. The mean score of the 80 parent and guardian submissions was 3.33, 0.12 points lower than the student average. More specifically, when comparing the difference between the 80 parent and guardian responses to their specific students, there was an average difference of -.049 in which parents rated their student's level of grit lower than they rated themselves.

In May, after four months of PLC implementation in which the staff explicitly targeted grit as a goal for growth, students and families were issued the same Duckworth survey as in the Fall. Again, nearly all students in grades six through eight participated, with three hundred and

forty-five submitting responses. The mean score decreased insignificantly from the initial survey to 3.44, compared to 3.46 in the Fall. This time, however, only 7.2% of students expressed that grit was a fixed skill that could not be developed, compared to 9.9% at the beginning of the year. The remaining 92.8% of student responses indicated that grit was either totally or somewhat changeable, with 20% suggesting it was entirely changeable, compared to 14.8% in the Fall (Figure 5).

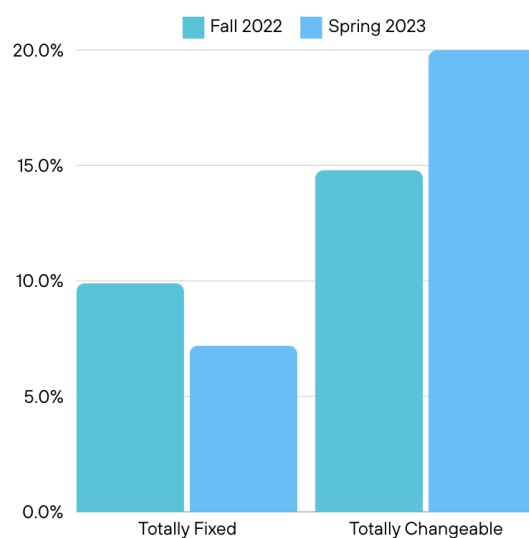


FIGURE 5. *Student Perceptions of Grit as a Fixed or Changeable Skill*

Parents and guardians were also offered an opportunity to complete the same survey, however, only five responses were collected. This small sample size hardly reflects the community and cannot be considered meaningful data to influence any next steps. However, we can compare those families' initial and final data and observe that they indicate an average growth in their students of .37 points on their Spring surveys compared to the Fall.

Through focus groups with sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade students in May at the end of the study, they expressed their understanding and appreciation of grit. Each of the three groups

consisted of four students from the same grade level, and the conversations were conducted during their grade level's corresponding forty-minute lunch period. Universally, all students expressed the need for grit to continue as a focus, as it aligned with what they viewed as a primary purpose of attending school. One seventh-grade student shared, "I think that what we are taught about how important grit is and how to develop our grit will impact our whole life. When we are older, we are going to face much bigger challenges, but the lessons learned in middle school about grit will have us ready to overcome those challenges." Another eighth-grade student shared, "Managing COVID in sixth grade was really difficult because we lacked grit. I wish we had been taught the lessons we learned this year back then. It would have helped us during a really difficult time." When asked if they noticed a specific focus on grit in their classrooms this year, all students in all grade levels indicated that they had. Specifically, students referenced teachers explicitly teaching lessons about grit during the homeroom period, teachers referencing grit prior to beginning a standardized test or classroom assessment, teachers reminding students to be gritty when the Internet went out, leaving them without their technology for the duration of the class period, and teachers explaining to students that transitioning to the next grade will come with challenges and require grit to overcome the hurdles. In response to my question about whether or not they feel they have improved their level of grit, one sixth-grade student replied, "I definitely think so. At the beginning of middle school, I was excited but also overwhelmed with the amount of work. My teachers started teaching us about grit in class, and it definitely changed my mindset. The workload did not change, but I did." Another seventh-grade student explained, "I have been told to persevere since kindergarten, but this year was very different. Teachers have been modeling and teaching grit, and I have been trying to overcome obstacles better. I used to

take the easy road, but now I am pushing myself a little more and doing work that will help me grow more.”

Teachers also participated in a focus group to articulate their experiences in the PLC model and how they reflected on working with their colleagues and perceived their students' grit. Included in the focus group were four teachers, one sixth-grade teacher, two seventh-grade teachers, and one eighth-grade teacher. This conversation occurred before school from 7:45-8:25 in our office conference room. When asked if they felt that student behavior and demonstrations of grit were impacted by their efforts as a result of the PLC conversations, one teacher replied, “Through the PLC meetings, we realized that we need to collaborate and design a new approach to get students to class with their completed assignments and required materials. Once we created a new unified approach, we saw a significant change in student behavior. It solved about eighty-five percent of the problem.” Another teacher described a few students who were struggling to complete assignments on time. When a few new strategies from the PLC conversations were implemented, their performance and ability to navigate the classroom expectations improved.

Collective Efficacy

Another potential outcome that was measured through this research and may have resulted from this approach to PLC implementation is the development of collective teacher efficacy (CTE) among the staff members. Using Goddard et al.'s (2000) definition of collective efficacy that it is determined by “the shared perceptions of teachers in a school that the efforts of the faculty as a whole will have positive effects on students,” the use of a collaborative model in which teachers achieve validation in their efforts, celebrate and share credit for accomplishments

as a team, increase confidence in their colleagues' knowledge and abilities, and see growth in their students as an outcome of the work may yield gains in CTE.

Twenty-three teachers completed and submitted the February issuance of the Goddard et al. (2000) collective efficacy survey offering initial data on CTE among District 1234's middle school staff (Appendix C). This survey was optional and was completed prior to beginning the PLC implementation. While the intention was for all teachers to complete this survey, it is likely that some elected not to submit responses for their own reasons or insecurities, while others were unable to attend the faculty meeting in which the survey was offered. As is the nature of our middle school schedule, we need staff supervising students and managing traffic flow before school begins to ensure everyone's safety, resulting in some staff to be unable to attend our faculty meetings in person. These individuals are responsible for reviewing notes from the meeting to be appropriately informed of happenings around the building. Several of the teachers who did not submit a consent form were assigned to other morning duties during the time of the survey.

Each of the twenty-one questions is scored on a Likert scale with "1" representing "Strongly Disagree" and "6" representing "Strongly Agree." The higher the total score, the higher the collective efficacy measured. There are ten questions in which the scores need to be reversed, and scoring a "1" would earn a score of six points, as strongly disagreeing with the statement demonstrates a higher level of efficacy. The questions that required reversed scoring are numbers 3, 4, 8, 10, 11, 12, 16, 18, 19, and 20. On a scale of 1 to 6, with 6 being the highest measured level of efficacy, the average collective efficacy for each of the twenty-one questions ranged from 3.78 (Question 20) to 5.91 (Question 4), and the average CE was 5.21, which scores in the 87th percentile.

Following four months of PLC implementation, a second issuance of the CE-Scale was distributed in May to all twenty-three original participants, and twenty submitted responses were collected (Appendix D). The data collected offered a range in average CE scores between 3.55 (Question 20) and 5.79 (Question 10), with an average overall CE of 5.09, scoring nearly in the 85th percentile. With a standard deviation of .56, no changes, positively or negatively, in the final data collection sample are of notable variance from the mean and can be considered a statistically significant change (Appendix E). The largest increase in average CE was .29 (Question 14), and the largest decrease was -.50 (Question 3). The overall CE score decreased by .12 from February to May following the implementation of the PLC.

In dissecting the survey data further (Figures 6 and 7), question 20, the lowest scoring question in both the February and May survey submissions, specifically states that teachers need more training to know how to deal with their struggling students. In February, none of the teachers strongly agreed with this statement, and four teachers strongly disagreed. In May, two teachers strongly agreed with this statement, and only three teachers strongly disagreed. There is a gap of .75 between the lowest score in May (question 20, 3.55) and the second lowest score (question 11, 4.30). Question 11, which states that teachers in this school do not have the skills to deal with students disciplinary problems, also decreased from winter to spring. Question 3 received one of the highest scores in the winter (5.70) and decreased by the largest margin in the spring (5.20). This question indicates that if a child doesn't want to learn, teachers give up. Initially, this question had all responses score in the strongly disagree or disagree categories, which sixteen teachers strongly disagreeing. In the spring, the strongly disagreeing number dropped to nine, and two teachers somewhat agreed with the statement. Excluding question 20, all other averaged responses received at least a score of 4.30, which is nearly in the 72nd

percentile. Additionally, the adjusted average score calculated without including question 20 increases the true score from 5.09 to 5.17, which is in the 86th percentile.

Question #3	SD	D	SWD	SWA	A	SA	Average
Winter	16	7	0	0	0	0	4.52
Spring	9	8	1	2	0	0	4.30

FIGURE 6. CTE Survey Data Question #3

Question #20	SD	D	SWD	SWA	A	SA	Average
Winter	4	3	4	8	4	0	3.78
Spring	3	3	3	6	3	2	3.55

FIGURE 7. CTE Survey Data Question #20

In contrast to the quantitative data, which exhibited a slight decrease in CE following the PLC implementation, the anecdotal evidence from the teacher focus group demonstrated a resounding excitement around the PLC model and its impact on collaboration, confidence, collegiality, and joy for their work. As teachers reflected on sharing their challenges during the interview, comments such as, “It felt great to hear other teachers commend me for my efforts,” and “It was affirming to know that I am not the only one struggling with this challenge” were shared. Similarly, one teacher explained, “I was part of the team that developed the PLC tool that we are using, and I love that it was developed by teachers with teachers’ needs in mind. I am not surprised that it worked so well or that it was so positively received by the staff.” She continued, “It allowed us to focus less on individual students and more on fixing the bigger problems, which

was almost like teacher therapy. It was cathartic.” Another teacher described her experience in the PLC model, sharing, “I felt it was a really nice and collaborative time to speak with our colleagues about issues we are observing, and people were very supportive. We received good feedback and some nice accolades, too. It helped me reach deeper into my own toolbox and allowed me to tap into others’ toolboxes as well.”

When asked how teachers implemented strategies shared from PLCs, one teacher said, “I know a number of the teachers implemented things that others suggested almost the next day.” Another teacher shared, “Our entire seventh grade behavioral support system, which is used throughout the grade level, was developed through our PLC meetings. As a group, we were able to address situations that were occurring for different teachers, and we were able to pull common threads together to form a system that worked for all of us. It was truly a collaborative process, and we continue to meet to work together and make sure that the system is working for everyone.” A sixth grade teacher shared, “One of my goals that I brought up during PLC meetings focused on helping students feel more confident and comfortable using their accommodations in my classroom. I walked away from our meetings with activities and strategies to try in class, and I’m glad that I was able to share some successes with the group as I tried some of those ideas.” The teachers all expressed comfort knowing that they had a team to rely on for ideas to address challenges and for support piloting potential solutions. All of the teachers shared that they could think of specific examples of strategies discussed during PLC meetings being implemented within the classrooms, many of which were shared as celebrations for the PLC to enjoy together.

Only two teachers interviewed had participated in other PLC models prior to this pilot, and one teacher offered their thoughts. They shared, “This one was more structured, and it used a

system that encouraged positivity and productivity among the team. Other PLCs I've been on were focused on departmental work, but this was the whole team, which was nice. Also, the SEL focus was a new piece that was really needed."

Teachers were also asked about this process's impact on how they see their colleagues. One teacher explained, "It reminded me of how amazing our teachers are and informed me of the awesome things everyone is doing. Teaching is a hard job, and the ideas and strategies being used throughout the building are really inspiring." All of the participating teachers were calling for more opportunities to collaborate with teachers outside of their grade level or department and implement more heterogeneous groups to access the knowledge and experiences of other teachers they collaborate with less frequently. A teacher summarized her experience, sharing, "After the last few years we have had, taking this approach has been very refreshing. This type of collaboration and support and community feel is definitely a positive component of these PLCs."

Interpretation

In analyzing the findings, evidence suggests that grit can be positively impacted by PLCs and intentional instruction addressing social-emotional needs. Additionally, collective teacher efficacy, measured in this study quantitatively and qualitatively, is a feeling teachers have in a building. The survey given in February offered initial data that already demonstrated high levels of efficacy. For teachers to report the dramatic impact that the PLC model had on their practice, student performance, and outlook on their profession demonstrates an effective collaborative system's impact on a teacher's sense of accomplishment and potential.

As I review the collected data on grit, I reflect on the inherent challenge of teaching students skills to enhance their social-emotional behaviors. Students expressed that they have

been taught to persevere and do their best throughout elementary school, yet some students continue to struggle with these skills. To expect a resounding change in students' social-emotional performance in four months may be unrealistic. With the very limited parent and guardian data received, there may be an indication that they observed a change in their child's levels of grit, but the sample size does not allow for a generalized conclusion to be offered. We continue to implement our social-emotionally centered PLCs with the hope that we produce more promising results leading to more significant and noticeable growth in grit and social-emotional wellness. Many students also indicated a growth in their grit; however, many students also indicated a loss in grit over the course of the year. Part of this could be a result of surveying students with only a few weeks remaining in the school year and a lack of interest in reflecting on their personal growth, but this also may result from a long-term goal that requires more than four months of explicit instruction to influence.

The quantitative survey data collected from students and parents yielded inconclusive results, however, the mindset to achieve social-emotional growth may have been impacted by the lessons and intentional conversations around grit and its importance. The Spring student survey results indicated a meaningful change in students' understanding of grit and the impression that it can be harnessed and fostered. The initial student survey at the beginning of the year identified 9.9% of respondents as convinced that grit cannot be developed, but instead, they viewed this skill as fixed and unchangeable. After the year's work, this group diminished to only 7.2% of the respondents. Similarly, 14.8% of students responded that grit is entirely changeable in the Fall, which grew to 20% in the Spring. If intentional instruction around grit can demonstrate to students that this skill can be fostered and convince them that it is important enough to focus on

developing, further explicit support over several more months or years may give students the leverage they need to truly make gains in this area.

To further demonstrate that students' mindsets were adjusted due to the teachers' efforts, students offered anecdotal data verifying the importance and significance of the lessons they were exposed to this year. Social-emotional development requires a willingness from the recipient to make gains, and the students interviewed in the focus groups convincingly explained how they were influenced by the instruction and activities about grit led by their teachers this year. When asked if the focus for next year should remain centered around developing grit, students universally dismissed any suggestion of shifting priorities to anything else. It should be noted that it is possible that students provided this response in support of the work being done so as to present a positive impression on me as their principal. While that may have been the intention of a few, the overwhelming support of the group and their specific examples of the impact that this focus has had on their year indicates that there was truth behind their recommendation to continue developing grit. The students expressed their interpretation of grit's meaning and purpose in their adult lives, and they requested more time to continue honing this skill throughout the remainder of their middle school years. One eighth-grader mentioned that he wished he had more time before high school to continue developing this skill, as he worries that as he gets older, the importance of demonstrating grit will only grow more significant.

As I consider the research questions posed in this study and reflect on whether or not this experiment yielded positive results, I am convinced that explicit instruction around specific social-emotional skill sets can expedite growth and positively impact students as they progress through their adolescence into adulthood. Social-emotional learning begins with a mindset of wanting to be the best version of one's self. With a conviction that the work is meaningful,

valuable, and possible, the skills can be practiced and refined to develop into strengths. The work of the PLCs, while short lived in duration, significantly impacted how students discuss and interpret the power of grit and their role in honing the skill. I recommend that further research be conducted to confirm that proper skill development can be measured over time, and I see indications that positive impacts would be more clearly exhibited should further research involving more substantial longitudinal data occur.

Concerning collective teacher efficacy, the quantitative data collected suggests a lack of impact from the PLC model, while the qualitative data outlines a vivid depiction of value and potential. Data collected from the Winter and Spring teacher surveys demonstrate a slight and statistically insignificant decrease in average collective efficacy in fifteen of twenty-one questions and an overall decrease of .12 points, equivalent to 2 percentile points. A few considerations that may have impacted the survey data are that the final survey was collected in the final two weeks of the school year. May is a very stressful time for many of our teachers, with ceremonies, assemblies, and grading all on the agenda. Additionally, the anticipation of Summer and the exhaustion from a year filled with initiatives and hard work may have teachers completing this survey in a different state of mind than when they submitted the initial data in February, not long after Winter Break. Specifically considering question 3, where teachers initially indicated high levels of confidence that we would not give up on students, the .50 decrease marked the largest from February to May, and is likely a result of exhaustion from a year of trying new strategies and addressing behaviors. Questions 11 and 20 both indicate a perceived skill deficit and suggest that more administrative support, intentional collaboration, and explicit professional development would be beneficial to increase teachers' confidence in

managing students who are struggling to follow expectations and navigate school appropriately or successfully.

The timing of this second survey may have also impacted the number of responses received, as the initial survey garnered 23 submissions, and the end-of-the-year survey only received 20 submissions. Only the 23 original participants were contacted to complete the Spring survey, and three of those individuals did not submit responses.

With the quantitative data in mind, the anecdotal responses were overwhelmingly positive, suggesting a significant improvement to the collaborative culture of the building. Teachers expressed sincere joy in partnering with teachers to problem-solve challenges they face in their classrooms and explore new approaches to supporting the development of grit in our students. Additionally, teachers explained the affirmation and positive feelings felt from implementing this specific PLC model, stating that their colleagues are a wealth of knowledge and incredibly talented and innovative. Through this process, teachers felt appreciated, valued, respected, and in control of their professional practice. They noted gains in student grit and social-emotional behaviors and credited the opportunity to collaborate with their colleagues through PLCs as the cause. The teachers appreciated this approach to collaboration so much that they requested additional professional development time to allow for more meetings with heterogeneous groups of teachers, exposing them to perspectives they do not often benefit from hearing. Comments shared by teachers reflecting on PLC meetings include, “PLCs allowed a great opportunity to learn from our incredible colleagues who have a different lens on classrooms challenges,” “It is great to hear fresh perspectives from colleagues outside of my classroom,” and “the PLC framework was a great way to help me feel validated in the strategies I had been implementing while still searching for ways to improve for my students.”

Collective teacher efficacy is based on the perception that teachers can influence student outcomes and that a team of teachers can make an even more significant impact when working together. CTE requires trust that everyone is working toward a common goal, confidence in one's own abilities and the abilities of others, a belief that the work we are striving to achieve is meaningful, and ownership that each person's responsibility is to further the collective cause of supporting our students. While the survey data did not yield conclusive results, it did demonstrate a consistently high level of collective efficacy among the District 1234 middle school staff. With such high levels of efficacy to begin the study, growth can be expected to be limited and dependent on the time of year that results are collected. It is clear, however, in speaking with teachers that this process was valuable, increased trust and collegiality, allowed for honest conversations to benefit students and refined professional practice, and allowed teachers to grow in confidence and positivity. To confirm the qualitative findings of this study and support the concept that this PLC model and focus on explicit instruction of grit helped build or reinforce CTE in the staff, further research with staff members from different schools and districts over more extended periods of time could support or reject this study's proposed conclusions.

Conclusion

Developing social-emotional capacity in students is difficult to teach and measure with confidence. Addressing these foundational and essential skills, such as grit, requires explicit instruction, significant time, and a collective focus reinforcing the importance of the desired goal. In four months, students were exposed to specific lessons outlining the value of developing grit and strategies to apply the skill in real-world situations. While the study did not permit enough time to conclusively change all students' behaviors, substantial evidence suggests that

students' mindsets have shifted to a new appreciation of grit and its role in their lives. Similarly, CTE is one of the most influential driving forces in successful schools, as it is one of the most influential variables in supporting student growth (Hattie, 2012). Uniting around a common goal of grit and offering a platform to promote trust and confidence among colleagues while enhancing professional practices for students' benefit has impacted District 1234's middle school environment. Utilizing this PLC model, designed by teachers for teachers and ultimately for students, has changed the conversations within the school environment. Teaching something as abstract as grit may not have seemed possible before this program, however, now there is evidence of change and growth as a result of this practice.

Nevertheless, fostering an environment primed for implementing a PLC structure and promoting student growth in grit depends on various factors that influence the school community daily. Considerations such as context, culture, conditions, and competencies can set a collaborative structure up for success or failure. Understanding the established norms in a school community and identifying how they may need to shift to support an initiative is essential in understanding the needs of a school and its stakeholders. The following chapter will identify the variables that impact and drive District 1234's students, staff, and community members to provide a clearer picture of how the district needs to evolve to support continued growth in these change efforts.

CHAPTER FIVE

Change Plan

Introduction

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have been well-established as a meaningful and valuable approach to collaboration in which teachers analyze data to reflect upon and revise their instructional practices. This effort has generally been designed to improve student academic performance. This study has explored the possibility of repurposing this data-driven approach to expedite the growth of students' social-emotional skills, particularly in the area of grit. In addition, the time, collective reflection, and collaborative communication between teachers were assessed to determine if an impact on collective teacher efficacy (CTE) would present as an additional benefit of utilizing this particular PLC model.

The findings from this study's research are inconclusive yet promising. Quantitatively, there is little data to suggest that the four-month experiment yielded any statistically significant gains in students' social-emotional development or CTE. In contrast, the qualitative data is overwhelmingly positive regarding the impact felt by teachers and students through this process. Students detailed several instances in which explicit instruction around grit influenced their performance on tasks and outlook on challenges. They regarded this focus as highly meaningful and expressed a consistent desire to continue developing this skill as a primary goal of middle school. Similarly, teachers relayed a united message that the collaborative approach used was respectful, empowering, innovative, and productive. Teachers felt their confidence grow as a result of receiving affirmation for their efforts and suggestions to evolve their practice. Teachers also shared how impressed they were to work with such accomplished and creative colleagues, some of whom they had never tapped into before as a resource for professional growth.

The inconsistencies between the modes of data collection lead to the inconclusive outcome, but the promise of meaningful, intentional, and structured collaboration impacting student social-emotional growth and CTE seems to have merit based on the findings. To continue refining our collaborative model and maintaining a focus on developing teacher approaches to explicitly foster students' social-emotional skills, an understanding and evaluation of the context, conditions, competencies, and culture of the community, district, school, and staff is required. Wagner and Kegan's (2006) "4 C's" framework provides structure for school and district leaders to reflect on an organization's strengths and weaknesses as they pertain to a specific change effort. In the case of this research, the 4 C's framework will allow for further analysis of why the PLC model was and was not effective in leading to students' social-emotional learning and teachers' development of collective efficacy and allow for appropriate planning to implement a change plan to increase the impact of this program.

As-Is

The research conducted through this study followed a four-month change effort in District 1234's middle school and produced encouraging results that could serve as a glimpse into an impactful model of collaboration to promote social-emotional growth. Wagner and Kegan (2006) outline an approach to identify and reflect on current practices and realities in order to label areas of strength and those that are hindering the change effort's potential. In order to transition the piloted methods into a systemic change, this "As-Is" reflection (Appendix I) outlines protocols, mindsets, restrictions, and limitations of the current District 1234 landscape. All of the variables outlined in this reflection impacted the results collected through this research. While some contributed to the promising outcomes of the study, others require

addressing in order to optimize the potential of continuing PLCs at District 1234's middle school and across the district.

Context

District 1234 is located in the Northern suburbs of Chicago and consists of many highly educated families. The community is considered very affluent, and the financial resources allotted to our instructional and supplemental programming are extensive. With 1,211 students enrolled in the district across three buildings, we are relatively small in size and can readily access materials and tools to benefit our students' learning opportunities. Our demographics include 57% white, 37% Asian, 1.4% black, and 2.7% Hispanic students. Only 3% of our students qualify as low-income, and none are homeless.

Our community has come to expect excellence in all that we do, and we expect that of ourselves and our students as well. Our families are regularly involved in programming, and their knowledge and connections have allowed for incredible Career Day activities, guest speakers, and field trips for our students. Because excellence is the expected norm, the vast majority of teacher communication with families is to report when expectations are not met. Our families are generally outstanding partners, but there is also a protective nature to preserve their child's and family's reputation, sometimes leading to conflicts between teachers and parents/guardians. When reminded that we are all on the same team to support their child, emotions are generally extinguished, and productive conversations can be had to problem-solve and address the challenge.

Many of our students have gone on to great success in high school, continuing education at incredible universities (Ivy League schools, exclusive artistic schools, etc.), and eventually impactful careers in adulthood. With this history, teachers can become overly invested in

students' academic achievement, losing sight of those who may not be on a trajectory for Harvard. It has also happened that teachers become engrossed in their content with their highest achieving students, neglecting some of the core competencies that they need to properly acclimate to the expectations of adulthood and the workforce. The students we celebrate the most often put in the least effort because learning and academic achievement come naturally to them. Those working the hardest, battling learning and emotional disabilities, are labeled as challenges and receive far less recognition for their growth. It has been a long-time goal of our school to find an adequate balance between social-emotional learning and the focus on academic growth, and PLCs have allowed for a significant step forward in recalibrating where we focus our collaborative efforts.

As was presented in Chapter 2 through data outlining dramatic increases in DCFS calls, risk assessments, and police interventions between 2022-2023 in comparison to 2018-2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted students' readiness and ability to manage stress, persevere through challenges, and safely navigate the social and emotional rollercoaster of adolescence. The skills and confidence that would typically have been nurtured through a continuous schooling experience were interrupted by remote learning experiences and a sense of fear and uncertainty. We cannot expect students to develop lagging social-emotional awareness and strategies without explicit instruction, just as we would not expect students to learn academic content without the direction and support of the teacher. If we are to continue preparing students for success beyond middle school, we must prioritize and emphasize collaborating around best practices to target SEL, specifically grit, in all aspects of the school day.

Conditions

The conditions, or “Tangible arrangements of time, space, and resources” (Wagner & Kegan, 2006, p. 101), for teaching in our building are exceptional. We have a state-of-the-art facility built in 2019 that was designed with input from many current staff members. Classrooms are equipped with multiple displays, interactive teaching tools, technologically advanced resources, and flexible, comfortable furniture that allows students and teachers to implement choice in developing a viable learning space. The building’s air quality and room size are of the highest level, and aside from a lack of storage, the building checks nearly all the boxes of a supreme learning space.

The current schedule places all students of the same grade among the same team of core-level teachers. The grade levels range in size from 130 to 160 students, and science and social studies teachers see all of them over two days. We utilize block scheduling to give 80 minutes of English and Math each day, with 80 minutes of Science and Social Studies every other day. Teachers understand their instructional roles and responsibilities, and support staff are available to assist in times of crisis. Two school psychologists and one psychologist intern support students and staff through emotionally challenging times. Recently revised in response to the pandemic, a 20-minute Advisory class was added to the bell schedule to allow teachers to connect with a smaller group of students and develop trusting relationships in a smaller and more comfortable group setting. These Advisory classes meet five days a week and help students navigate through various age-appropriate content and challenges within the school setting.

Out of ten periods in the school day, teachers are allotted one period for lunch and three periods for planning. Once per week, teachers are expected to meet with their grade level teams during one of their plan periods to discuss student challenges or engage in PLC collaboration.

Once per month, teachers have a department meeting to review curricular needs for their specific department across grade levels. The building administration regularly attends department and team meetings to offer support and engage in collaborative problem-solving.

Despite teachers having fifteen plan periods each week, the thought of sacrificing any more than the single plan period for coordinated teacher collaboration was a point of high contention among the staff. As we developed our PLC model, teachers were adamant that their planning periods were precious time that they used to grade papers and prepare for upcoming classes. The argument was presented that PLCs allow teachers to prepare for upcoming classes by coordinating lessons and determining most effective practices to enhance student learning. However, teachers were insistent that this new program would not receive the support from the staff if more currently unpurposed planning periods were lost to carve out time for this initiative.

There are agreed-upon learning targets and standards-based reporting throughout the school; however, those targets and standards do not pertain to emotional and social expectations. Consistency in upholding school rules and addressing challenging situations is absent and needs to be corrected. The district has offered curricular resources for academic subjects; however, the teachers have determined that Second Step, a social-emotional curriculum previously used, is not relatable for our student population. As a result, the school psychologists and SLT partnered to develop an SEL curriculum that they feel more appropriately addresses the needs of the students. Some examples of topics explored through this in-house Advisory program include peer pressure, bullying, substance abuse, time management, and executive functioning skills. There are not enough lessons to fill all five days of the week, leaving time for team-building activities and occasionally study hall. During study halls days, students can either work independently, with peers, or connect with other teachers for further support. There is no data to determine this

tool's effectiveness outside of office referrals, but accurate records were not maintained prior to its implementation, so comparisons are difficult.

Competencies

Wagner and Kegan define “competencies” as “The repertoire of skills and knowledge that influences student learning” (p. 99). This area of our work needs significant improvement to truly address our students’ needs. While teachers are considered experts in their fields and utilize skills and approaches that are engaging and of high quality, our teachers struggle to appropriately prepare for lessons by addressing students’ social-emotional needs. Teachers have developed a tunnel vision of focus that prioritizes the academic performance and instructional pacing of lessons above student behavior and needs. Our staff is able to recognize students in distress, but they often struggle to respond with empathetic and student-centered approaches centered around recalibrating the student and building relationships with those who are exhibiting concerning behavior. During team meetings, it is not uncommon to hear about the same students demonstrating disruptive, passive, or concerning behaviors, and teachers are not always able to provide steps they have implemented to address the challenge, nor have they always attempted to learn why the student is behaving in that fashion. There is an expectation that students who are disruptive to the learning environment instantly become the administration’s or psychologists’ responsibility. Rather than taking the time to connect with the student, the impulsive reaction is to label the student as a challenge and solicit disciplinary support from the principals.

Some members of the Staff Leadership Team (SLT) have a more thorough understanding of Ross Greene’s (2009) work in which behavior is viewed as a skill that needs to be learned, no different than any content in a class. His philosophy that students do well if they can, not if they want to, is challenging for some staff members to accept, and their patience to ensure each

student is emotionally equipped with the tools for success varies across the building. Professional development occurs regularly in which we explore Ross Greene's work, practice applying it to various situations, and connect it to our monthly RULER professional development opportunities, training our staff to support each other and our students with emotional articulation and regulation. RULER's focus on identifying how we feel, determining how we want to feel, and communicating our needs to regulate our emotions aligns closely with Greene's philosophy that students can only learn if they are emotionally accessible to the learning opportunities being presented. The SLT, building administration, and district administration have committed significant time to strategize how to support teachers in this training and emphasizing the importance of prioritizing students' emotional wellness to enable students to achieve more profound levels of learning.

The goal of utilizing PLCs to collect and analyze student behavior data and adjust instructional practices to address observed needs is in the preliminary stages. Teachers are responding positively to the work, although some need support when they begin blaming students for their behavior rather than problem-solving how they can adjust their approach to support their students better. The Critical Friends framework (Pieratt, 2021) proved particularly useful in promoting effective and productive collaboration. This model explicitly addresses how colleagues can acknowledge efforts already made to remedy challenges while still offering feedback on new strategies a teacher may attempt. This model has allowed for calm and meaningful conversations and promotes a safe, collaborative space where teachers can be vulnerable.

We have more work to do to make such collaboration and solution-oriented conversations more typical, but we have undoubtedly taken a giant step forward through our PLC model.

Teachers engage in conversations about what they can do to support their students with minimal conversation about the students' limitations being a problem for the teacher.

Culture

The current culture consisting of “Shared values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and behaviors related to students and learning, teachers and teaching, instructional leadership, and the quality of relationships within and beyond the school” (Wagner & Kegan, 2006, p. 102), promotes high expectations for students learning, but there is also an expectation that students want to learn. To those who thrive, our school environment pushes them to their potential and celebrates their successes as evidence of our outstanding work. In contrast, those who struggle will receive support, but the patience and determination of the teacher to individualize learning to meet each student’s needs is limited. Teachers are quick to recommend a student for counseling or to the office for disciplinary support if students do not naturally present themselves as compliant and motivated. Fortunately, as a small school with only about 400 students, we can address the needs of students when recommended for more intentional support from the student services team. That being stated, the variance in which teachers differentiate for students is limited, and teachers expect students to maintain the pace of the class with minimal intervention. This is demonstrated through a resistance by some to adopt practices in which students rotate through stations and receive more individualized attention, as well as teachers recommending students placed in higher tracks of math be moved to a slower paced class if they struggle rather than offering them the necessary support themselves.

The lack of patience for students who do not consistently present as compliant and motivated may be a result of added stress and frustration developed by teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic when we pushed ourselves very hard to provide optimal learning

experiences for students through modified practices and a more strict environment. The anxiety and uncertainty felt by students during this time was also felt by staff, and it presented during our conversations about how to best implement a PLC model. Teachers who were asked to participate in the PLC development committee approached the work with hesitation and skepticism. Their caution to preserve their planning periods and limit added stress associated with additional meetings was evident, and the insertion of a meeting sequence that led with celebrations and accolades resulted from their insecurity and desire for positivity and affirmation. The teachers were hurting, and while they saw the need to support struggling students, they also needed to protect themselves from more modifications to their working conditions that would impact their emotional wellness.

The District Office has done an admirable job designing comprehensive Board Goals that unite the district in meaningful work around inclusivity, SEL, and academic success. Additionally, the District Office has emphasized the importance of professional collaboration. The support of the School Board and district administrators has allowed building-level leadership to implement plans to address these targets while maintaining a unified vision.

Communication and co-ownership of goals within the building are strong. A robust SLT, consisting of 14 teacher leaders of various grade levels and departments, offers consultative feedback on ideas and initiatives, and they are often tasked with revising and presenting the consensus decisions to their constituent groups. In this way, teachers own the work taking place in the building. Moreover, while the building administration makes final decisions, few directives are issued without first discussing and refining plans with the SLT. This has helped establish trust and confidence in one another, and teachers' leadership skills have been developed to benefit the school's productivity.

Challenges have recently arisen between teachers and the District Office since the beginning of the pandemic, which have caused strain on the system. While the district administration views their response to the pandemic as heroic and optimal, teachers feel under-appreciated and over-used. Both perspectives are likely valid, and navigating this unprecedented situation was unlikely to promote positive feelings in all stakeholders, but the lingering negativity needs to be addressed in order for trust to be re-established between teachers and the district.

The institution of PLCs has begun to reframe how we approach struggling students, but the tendency to blame the student's lack of effort or misbehavior as the cause of their poor academic performance is still present. Similarly, when student standardized test scores do not match historical data, blame on teachers can sometimes be the initial response. Being solution-oriented and seeking growth from challenges can be a struggle, but those who implement this approach serve as leaders to those who resist this self-reflection.

Envisioning the Success: To-Be

Establishing a clear understanding of where we currently experience successes and challenges within our organization allows us to visualize needed changes to promote even more remarkable achievement and student growth in the future. Implementing new structures, approaches, priorities, and philosophies can help us accomplish the ideal and offer an optimal learning environment for all stakeholders to thrive. Continuing Wagner and Kegan's (2006) reflection process, I present recommendations and modifications to District 1234's current context, conditions, competencies, and culture through this "To-Be" outline (Appendix J) in an effort to establish more ideal conditions to support the PLC work ahead.

Context

We will continue to harness the intelligent, experienced, and engaged community we serve to enhance learning experiences for our students. Our community is an incredible resource that extends our ability to serve our students, and maintaining open collaboration is critical for providing optimal opportunities for our students. A focus will be placed on communicating with families in the community about positive behavior, academic and SEL successes, and recognizing student gains to balance the skewed current approach of reaching out when there are problems. Teachers will partner with families through consistent communication and their colleagues through PLCs to better understand their students, foster relationships that promote safe classrooms, and improve their instructional approach to benefit their students.

The pressure placed upon 12 to 14-year-old students to achieve success immediately disregards each student's personal challenges and individual learning needs. To address the data that indicates students are generally feeling ill-prepared and overwhelmed with the middle school experience, we will recommit to our mission of supporting every student, meeting them where they are, and coaching them to eventual success. We will collaborate with families along the journey and celebrate their progress regularly, reinforcing that learning is a process and is worth striving for. We will view success differently as well, familiarizing ourselves with Wagner's message that current employees are far less concerned about the content knowledge students remember from school and far more interested in their ability to collaborate, problem-solve, persevere, communicate, and connect with others. Utilizing PLCs to refine our instructional practices and promote skill development in these areas, we will not only prepare students to meet the academic rigors of future education but also equip them with the tools needed to integrate into the workforce and society effectively.

Conditions

While much of the current physical conditions are already ideal, the model in which teachers interact with students can use revisiting. There is only one Science and Social Studies teacher per grade, which leaves them responsible for educating and forming relationships with upwards of 160 students each year, and they only see their students two or three times a week. In comparison, at least two Math and ELA teachers are in each grade, allowing them to see closer to 70-80 students daily. Hiring another Science and Social Studies teacher in each grade would allow us to form grade-level teams, creating job-alike partners to improve collaboration and reduce the number of students each teacher sees. Classroom and lab spaces would be limited, and flexibility would be required, but this may allow teachers to engage in more meaningful and targeted conversations about students and instructional practices.

Additionally, collaborative meetings need to occur more frequently. Meeting once a week allows teachers 95% of their planning and lunchtime to be self-directed, which does not promote collaboration or improvement. To our teachers' credit, many of them do elect to meet with their colleagues throughout the week to plan lessons and develop inter-rater reliability on assessments, but this is not structured, and teachers are not utilizing student data to inform their practice. PLC meetings should occur multiple times each week, and department meetings should take place multiple times each month. This would be a significant change in practice and job conditions, but the benefits would likely be significant. This recommendation would not require any scheduling changes, as each teacher's schedule is identical for each day of the week. Meeting only on Thursdays could be increased to meeting on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and it would only cost teachers two more of their fourteen remaining planning periods for the week.

Competencies

As we continue to improve the middle school staff's competencies, we must prioritize students as the primary benefactor of our hard work. We must remember that students are more than empty vessels to fill with knowledge. Our responsibility to our students is to equip them with the tools and support to manage challenges, build versatility and flexibility to respond to various situations, develop the confidence to ask questions and explore the unknown, and practice the interpersonal skills needed to productively and respectfully interact in class and society. When students struggle to demonstrate these skills, we cannot allow their delay to impede our ability to teach. Instead, we must assess for understanding, collect data, and analyze results in the moment to ensure that we are reaching our students. If our students continue to struggle, we must use these opportunities to establish relationships with our students and help them, acknowledging where they are and where the target is. Not all students learn math at the same pace, and not all students develop interpersonal skills at the same rate. We need to teach, not simply lecture, and ensure that students absorb and retain what we share.

We will continue to harness PLCs as a means of collaborating to develop optimal instructional strategies to reach all of our students, and our SLT will continue to lead the charge that each student deserves a classroom and school environment where they can feel welcome and cared for. Each student brings their own background into school, and for some, it is layered with trauma and stress. We do not blame students for this but support them through their struggles.

The PLCs are currently implemented during a single planning period every other week. Hopefully, through garnering positive results, teachers will find significant value in this work and accept meeting more regularly to improve their craft and benefit their students. Our teachers will continue to be comfortable being vulnerable with their colleagues and seek strategies to

make midcourse corrections to responsively adapt to students' needs in the moment. This will reduce student referrals to the office, build more positive relationships between teachers and their colleagues and teachers and their students, and we will better equip our students with the tools they need to access learning at their potential.

Culture

Continuing to embed PLCs into the fabric of our building will promote growth in teachers and students, encourage innovation, and place students' needs at the center of our practice. Differentiation will be the priority, and fostering relationships to understand why students misbehave or underperform will promote a learning environment for all that fosters success. Celebrations of achievement will not be reserved for our highest GPAs and test scores but for those who achieve growth and persevere through challenges. Students who overcome obstacles and develop socially and emotionally to become more well-rounded young adults will be recognized for their growth. We will hold all students to a high standard and differentiate our practices to allow them to meet those standards of excellence at their time and with our support.

Because the practices will support student learning universally, teachers will be confident to innovate their practices without fear of blame when new lessons are not executed as designed or do not yield the anticipated results. Teachers will be trusted by all colleagues and administrators to use their professional judgment to manage their classrooms and foster a positive environment of inclusivity and care. When challenges arise, teachers will look internally and reflect upon their practice to determine how to approach situations differently to benefit the affected stakeholders. Similarly, teachers will trust their colleagues and administrators to utilize the SLT to design initiatives aligned with the school's and district's vision and with positive intentions to benefit student performance.

The District Office will continue to execute a streamlined vision that clarifies the priorities of the administration and School Board while also allowing flexibility as to the approaches for implementation in the elementary and middle school buildings.

Conclusion

District 1234 is well-positioned to further its already-established history of greatness and student achievement. Addressing the 4 C's in the manner outlined in this chapter will offer more unity around the goals and provide the cohesive direction required for collective efficacy to be felt throughout the organization. In order to achieve the change plan, policies need to be reviewed and the next steps considered so that the entire district is aligned in a joint effort to support our students' growth. The following chapter will offer strategies and suggested actions to assist in bringing the proposed change plan to fruition.

CHAPTER SIX

Strategies and Actions, Implications, Policy Recommendations

Introduction

It is impossible to ignore the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on District 1234's students, families, and school personnel. The stress associated with manufacturing systems that would inevitably need to be re-evaluated and reconfigured within days of their implementation created a sense of instability and frustration among all stakeholders, and the lack of routines that provided consistent social-emotional support for our students has left a lingering effect on our students' ability to cope with the pressures of middle school. Credit must be given to our administrators, teachers, families, and students for navigating such a tumultuous time with poise and confidence, always acting with research and students' safety and learning in mind. However, these were difficult years, and we cannot simply reinstate past practices expecting the same results when our students and school community have changed.

Lubelfeld and Polyak (2017) outline how, in many ways, schools and our academic achievement priorities have remained the same as the nineteenth-century models despite so much around education evolving so dramatically. We have new technologies, new concerns, new challenges, new career paths, and new pandemics that we need to adjust to, yet given the chance with COVID in the rearview mirror, we will fall back into the same patterns and systems that we have been practicing for decades. These are viewed as tried and true methods of education that produce the results we need, yet I argue that the results we truly need center around fostering creativity, individuality, collaboration, communication, and self-confidence, increasing our students' capacity for accessing academic learning. Lubelfeld and Polyak propose that we must unlearn what we think we know about effective schooling and reimagine our goals and how to

optimally reach students. Students' well-being and social-emotional health are problems that we must face while also presenting an opportunity to recalibrate how we establish a nurturing school environment that promotes a sense of belonging for each student. Asking questions about what we value, who we want our students to become as adults, and how we can best collaborate to maximize our impact on student development will guide our actions as we exit the pandemic and face the challenges left in its wake.

Strategies and Actions

Establishing the foundation and alignment for thorough changes to systems, schedules, and philosophies that will reach our students requires planning and significant energy. We must access research, analyze data, and synthesize our findings while always remembering our greatest responsibility: the students. "School leaders should have a strong sense of their core values and beliefs. Much of this informs not only the work we do but also why we do the work that we do" (Lubelfeld & Polyak, 2017, p. 84). We are in our positions to serve our students and address their needs. While we value the common core standards and feel obligated to adhere to our curriculum maps and pacing guides, we must demonstrate flexibility and respond to the social-emotional needs of our students, as the data indicates that they are desperate for our help. Lubelfeld and Polyak (2017) outline that rigidity and ignorance from leadership attempting to focus on predetermined priorities that are blind to the actual needs being expressed by the stakeholders is an exercise that is doomed to fail.

Reeves (2021) references Kotter's (1995) work outlining pitfalls and complications that can stall a change plan implementation or acceptance within a community. To combat such challenges, they emphasize the eight considerations for which to prepare to accelerate a change plan's impact. The considerations include (1) Creating a sense of urgency, (2) Building a guiding

coalition, (3) Forming a strategic vision with initiatives, (4) Enlisting a volunteer army, (5) Enabling action by removing barriers, (6) Generating short-term wins, (7) Sustaining achievement before proclaiming success, and (8) Transitioning change initiatives to the organizational culture.

The proposed strategies and actions below (Figure 8) are designed as a guide for District 1234, and other districts, to effectively promote change, not only in our practice for supporting our middle school students' social-emotional wellness but also in our philosophy of how to approach learning with SEL as a foundational pillar. Specifically, the recommendations are derived from further analysis of the "To-Be" report provided in Appendix J, with reference to Kotter's (1995) eight guiding principles and the data and research provided throughout this study. Along with guiding the practices of District 1234's middle school, I hope these strategies resonate with similar districts, promoting all educational leaders to evaluate our students' needs and design change efforts to more explicitly prioritize SEL.

Strategies:	Action Steps:
<p>Create a Sense of Urgency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Re-assess the narrative. ● Be explicit about the SEL needs of students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Utilize surveys and focus groups to collect student voices and capture a realistic image of students' needs. ● Communicate student needs clearly with staff and families to foster a collaborative approach to navigating change. ● Create an aligned and unified understanding of SEL needs.

<p>Establish a Guiding Coalition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a team to continuously monitor growth and need in SEL. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize teacher, building, and district leaders to analyze data and needs. • Invest time and finances into providing ample support for students. Consider staffing and schedule changes that offer enhanced support for students in crisis. • Coalition reviews the current SEL curriculum and infuses needed changes to address needs found in the data. • The team seeks and provides professional development for staff to be equipped to meet students' needs. • Coalition builds community competency to support the school's goals and reinforce lessons taught at home. • Expand focus to elementary schools to teach SEL skills to younger students in preparation for more stressful middle school years ahead.
<p>Remove Barriers and Institute Change (Build Organizational Capacity)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyze the existing limitations of SEL support and determine systems for sustained success. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce concerns about academic demands and focus more intentionally on addressing SEL needs. • Address the SEL needs of the staff to increase their capacity to address the needs of others.

FIGURE 8. *Strategies and Actions Chart*

Strategy 1: Create a Sense of Urgency

The current narrative surrounding District 1234 is that we have incredibly high-achieving students, a beautiful new facility, and all the resources imaginable to support student learning. Families flock to our district to allow their children to learn in the best environment possible because that is the accepted narrative. Even following the COVID-19 pandemic, our test scores have risen back to rates of pre-pandemic excellence, and some even higher than that, and those are the messages circulating in our communities. They are not inaccurate, but they do not describe the whole child or outline the incredible strain, pressure, and confusion felt by our students in recent years. Reeves (2021) posits that much of the change that we see in schools and

organizations is sparked by fear. We must present a transparent depiction of how students feel in our schools today, and in doing so, we must recognize the time-sensitive response required where we band together to address their needs.

Being an academic leader, District 1234 collects standardized and growth data in math, English language arts, reading, Spanish, and science. We carefully chart the metrics of our students as they grow their knowledge and demonstrate achievement on these various benchmarks, and we analyze our practices to determine areas for continued improvement to increase their scores. Not to diminish the genuine care we demonstrate for our students, because we do genuinely care about each child, our school and community place a high value on academic achievement, and we expect to produce impressive results. Meanwhile, the middle school does not offer a student SEL screener to identify students needing support or offer surveys to gather trend data on concerns students feel navigating the school system. Brackett (2019) explains that our daily lives constantly require that we be skilled in navigating our emotions and utilizing tools to achieve emotions that will be beneficial for a particular moment or task, yet few schools prioritize time for teaching or assessing emotional skills. Our district's echo speaks to fostering social-emotional growth in our students, and our students explicitly shared their desire to continue engaging in lessons centered around developing grit and other related social-emotional skills during the focus groups, yet we do not collect data to ensure that students receive the support they need.

Creating a sense of urgency around this work is a first step toward uniting stakeholders around the importance of meeting our students where they are emotionally so they can achieve their potential without being hindered by a lack of SEL skills. We need to utilize a student SEL universal screener, delivered to each student at the beginning of each year, to identify individuals

exhibiting significant needs and requiring immediate proactive assistance before experiencing a crisis. We must conduct subsequent surveys and focus groups with staff, students, and community members to better understand the pressures, stresses, and frustrations that students are experiencing at school and home. If there are systemic challenges, we need to address them and do so with an innovative, collaborative, and student-centered approach.

Too often, adults try to explain to students what they think they need when students are perfectly capable of outlining what they need if there is an audience who will listen, as demonstrated in each student focus group. The adults in the building need to more actively and intentionally solicit student voices and use their feedback to foster a safe school environment that promotes engagement and joy for learning. Wagner (2014) reminds us that “the district that has ten priorities really has none” (p. 127). Students’ SEL needs deserve our closest attention, especially when considering the ramifications we are witnessing in our school and across the country. When we speak of supporting the entire student, we need to place explicit emphasis on preparing them for the challenges they will face, equipping them with the tools they need to overcome them, and staffing appropriate support teams to meet their needs and offer them coaching.

The feedback we receive from our data collection needs to be considered and incorporated into the messaging shared with the community, as it is only through a shared vision that prioritizes our students’ social-emotional growth that we will be able to support students in and out of school (Lubelfeld & Polyak, 2017). We need to be transparent in communicating the trends we observe to families and not hide from or be ashamed of our challenges. Brackett (2019) explains that there are no right or wrong emotions and that we should honor how we feel as we experience situations. Our students, families, and staff emerged from a traumatic

pandemic, and we need to be cognizant of the residual impact we are feeling. Only through a clear and consistent message can we begin to reframe the narrative to a more accurate depiction of how our students are experiencing school. With this aligned understanding, we can develop a guiding coalition of stakeholders to move us forward and address the challenges.

Strategy 2: Establish a Guiding Coalition

Kotter (1995) insists that while a team leading change should not be too broad or include too many stakeholders, it must include those with decision-making power. With a district echo promoting SEL and a clear message spreading throughout the community that District 1234 is intentionally addressing these concerns, district-level leadership from the student services and curriculum and instruction departments will be beneficial. In addition to their district-level leadership positions, having the teacher and administrative leaders from each school in the district and school psychologists present to analyze collected data and discuss how best to support students would form a well-rounded and meaningful team. This team's primary responsibility will be to interpret the student data and determine necessary system, staffing, curricular, and schedule changes to address the issues. As decisions are outlined, constituent groups of impacted stakeholders can be included to ensure all considerations and perspectives are incorporated into the eventual outcome.

As a first point of emphasis for this guiding coalition, the current SEL curriculum administered through daily 20-minute Advisory lessons needs to be dissected and re-evaluated. Survey data collected from students should outline points of emphasis that need to be addressed within the curriculum, and a scope and sequence can be designed for a logical and age-appropriate spiraling curriculum. School psychologists can partner with the building and district-level administrators to review existing SEL curricula and develop new plans that better

address our current needs. As lessons are designed, staff should be offered professional development to ensure the fidelity of the SEL instruction and provide the necessary training to navigate these sensitive topics. As found in the Goddard et al. (2000) collective efficacy survey, teachers indicated a decrease in confidence on questions 11 and 20, both of which reference their skillset to address students who need more support. Teachers crave professional development to enhance their comfort in navigating the various needs students may exhibit, and this, in turn, will increase CTE, which Hattie (2012) outlined as having an optimal predictive impact on student performance. It is also critical to incorporate elementary school principals and school psychologists in this work, as these challenges currently facing middle school students are partially due to a lack of tools received during their education before this point. That reality leaves both elementary and middle schools responsible for providing explicit instruction to students to gradually expose them to the necessary tools.

Furthermore, a significant component of this study's research was to infuse SEL throughout the school with a PLC model that promotes SEL instruction in all classes. Incorporating teachers in the process of developing the PLC model was critical to its success and helped identify grit as the primary focus of the collaborative meetings. PLCs require teachers to experience vulnerability, actively seek professional development, and embrace innovation. To effectively conduct PLC meetings with fidelity, teachers should be engaged in an authentic process to understand the purpose of the initiative and identify any of their priorities or considerations. If possible, involve the teacher association leaders early in the process so they are aware of the goals and rationale for introducing the PLC model and can offer support if some staff begin to oppose the change. Additionally, when selecting a team to develop the PLC structure, leaders should be intentional about who they invite so as to not have a group featuring

only innovative early adopters. Hearing the dissenting and resistant voices is equally important as hearing those who approach this idea favorably. Leaders can be sure that they will eventually hear from those who are upset about the change, and if it comes after implementing the plan, it can derail the overall success of the pilot program. Including some of the more challenging staff members in the development of the system can allow them to share their concerns with a smaller audience, earn their buy-in to the success of the program, and have them lead the rollout among their colleagues.

Once a PLC model is established and ready to be piloted, administrator involvement in meetings can be valuable, but it can also give an impression of micromanagement or distrust. Instructional leaders should be present in many teacher meetings throughout the year, and in doing so, they become welcome and active collaborators. If a leader's presence is perceived as abnormal or intimidating, it will negatively impact the outcome of the PLC meetings. Instructional leaders need to be careful not to present as supervising a meeting but rather participating in its success. We all are working toward a common goal, to provide the best opportunities for our students through optimal instructional practices. The building leaders are thoroughly invested in the success of our teachers in delivering on that goal. I strongly recommend that any building leader eager to participate in a new initiative reflect on the perception of their presence by the other participants. If their involvement is unexpected, a change in practices by the leader may be recommended to promote more visibility and partnership throughout professional development opportunities.

In analyzing the PLC schedule, further discussions are needed regarding how frequently PLC meetings should be held to increase the frequency and effectiveness of their delivery in curricular classes. Some effective models for PLCs utilized around the neighboring districts are

to dedicate time before or after school each week on a designated day to allow open collaboration between any staff members eager to partner in this work. Another option used by a nearby district is to adjust the bell schedule on designated days of the week to allow students to arrive late or be dismissed early, leaving time for teachers to connect. These meetings are negotiated into the collective bargaining agreement and therefore are part of the expected job responsibilities of the teachers. The piloted approach is structured around using time during the school day, which allows students to receive a full day of schooling and staff to maintain consistent school day hours. However, the staff available to participate in meetings is limited to those who share common plan periods during the time of the meeting. Additionally, the piloted model only asks that staff meet once every two weeks. The coalition should review these practices and the models of neighboring districts to determine the ideal schedule and frequency for PLC meetings.

As with many initiatives, this charge will require a financial investment to ensure that staffing and resources are appropriately designed to offer students the support they need. Currently, District 1234 employs school psychologists to conduct counseling with students and evaluations for specified learning plans and their accommodations. These individuals are stretched very thin and are left with limited time to support teachers' needs and lead professional development to expand their skill sets in delivering meaningful SEL instruction. Further support is required, and hiring social workers is a significant first step. Students in crisis come to the office in search of assistance, and far too often, they are met with an office team scrambling to find someone available to meet with them, even though everyone's intentions are pure and all staff are executing their roles appropriately. This coalition must invest in personnel specifically trained in working with middle school students as they navigate stress, anxiety, and more

significant thoughts of self-harm. With a more dispersed team that can more readily manage our students' needs, we will be able to utilize any hired social workers to support explicit SEL instruction in the classrooms and enhance the skillsets of our staff to deliver this material in the future.

Additional funding must also be dedicated to training staff to address emergency social-emotional situations, as students' responses may be triggered in classrooms where student service personnel are not present. Professional development, both with internal and external facilitators, must be prioritized to equip teachers with the strategies and confidence to appropriately support their students and initiate the next steps for getting them the necessary support. As staff receives such training, further efforts must be made to bring similar offerings to our community and families. Students may exhibit concerning behaviors at home, and families need to be equally prepared to meet their child's needs and engage in collaborative problem-solving with the school. School and home are partners in ensuring students are safe and well-rounded. We need open communication about the lessons our students are learning and the training our staff are receiving while also being responsive to the communication coming from home. Engaging in similar trainings geared towards our different roles in our students' lives will help provide them with consistent messaging and support from all directions.

Strategy 3: Remove Barriers and Institute Change (Build Organizational Capacity)

With the SEL curriculum outlined and the schedules for optimal PLC collaboration reviewed and implemented, we need to remove other potential barriers to our success so that any initial successes can become ingrained in the fabric of the school environment. Kotter (1995) suggests that long-term change requires that norms and routines be aligned with the sought-after goal. Our transparent and constant communication with stakeholders around initiatives and

programs aimed at addressing our students' concerning behaviors serves as a reminder that SEL and the emotions of our students are our highest priority. The adults surrounding our students must behave and speak in and out of school in a manner that reinforces this message, modeling consistency and care for our students.

While we will still utilize a curriculum map aligned with standards, pacing guides that hold us accountable to cover the intended content, and assessments to demonstrate what our students understand, we will do so with compassion that each student learns at a different pace, empathy for the experiences a student is carrying with them from other environments that day, and flexibility to address the most important social-emotional needs for a student, prioritizing that over the academic objectives of the day. As leaders in their classrooms, teachers will be given explicit permission to adjust their plans as necessary to foster a caring and accommodating environment. Students needing emotional support will receive permission to visit our social workers, and the academic expectations will be realized as secondary to any SEL required to coach them through their challenges. Contingent on the data we receive from surveys and focus groups, our pacing will reflect a responsible yet cognizant tempo, and the minutes allotted to content areas and Advisory may be adjusted accordingly. We cannot disregard the academic demands of appropriately educating our students, and our district leadership will expect us to continue to strive for excellence and deliver content aligned to the state standards, but we will unite around an understanding that students who cannot access the learning will not benefit from faster paces of instruction. We will establish a school environment that not only preaches the importance of emotional intelligence and stability but also has systems in place that foster comfort and encourage well-being.

These systems must not be limited to only addressing our students' needs but also those of our staff and families. We all experienced hardship, frustration, and stress as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and we all need to experience school as a place of acceptance, understanding, and warmth. Teaching is an incredibly demanding, exhausting, and rigorous job, where decisions are made at a rapid pace to adjust instruction, respond to an infinite number of situations, and communicate messages with various stakeholders at a moment's notice. When not in front of students, teachers plan, innovate, grade, provide feedback, and collaborate with colleagues to prepare for their next lessons. This cycle of work and stress seems endless, and while the teaching profession is also the most important and rewarding career, allowing us the opportunity to shape students into our future leaders for every career imaginable, for many, the innate rewards do not evenly balance the scales with the grind of teaching through a pandemic filled with change, fear, and uncertainty. We must support our teachers and families who navigated such difficult times with poise and professionalism.

Offering opportunities for staff to engage in social experiences with their colleagues or providing moments of reflection, peace, and even meditation can serve as examples of how we can intentionally incorporate joy back into our teachers' careers. Leaders must be cautious and cognizant of how they schedule their teachers, monopolize their plan time, and call on them to fill voids. These instructional leaders who followed a path to a teaching career for all of the right reasons need to be given explicit reminders through our actions that they are appreciated and valued. The energy and efforts we put into supporting our teachers' emotional well-being will directly translate to how they present themselves in front of their students, modeling composure, empathy, patience, and flexibility to meet their class' needs. Shawn Achor (2010), a positive psychologist, suggests that true happiness cannot be obtained by receiving a reward because with

each success, our measure of success changes, creating an endless search for happiness because the end goal is never achieved. In contrast, those genuinely happy with who they are and doing what they do are most likely to succeed. As Achor states, “Happiness is the precursor to success, not merely the result” (p. 8). With this research in mind, it is a wise investment of a district’s and leader’s resources to maintain the intrinsic motivation and joy that drew so many teachers into the field, as it is through fostering and maintaining their happiness that they will perform at the highest levels, achieving success through their students’ achievements.

Policy Statement

Given the dramatic increase in and significance of students reporting thoughts of self-harm and general negativity, coupled with the preliminary data resulting from this four-month pilot PLC program, it is my recommendation that District 1234 add verbiage to their already well-established policy 6:65, “Student Social and Emotional Development” that outlines the importance of collaboration explicitly designed to deliver universal social-emotional learning (SEL) in all classes throughout the school environment. This study provides a foundational understanding of how professional learning communities (PLCs) can be designed to target SEL and foster a more resilient and empathetic school culture. With this understanding, I urge District 1234 and other districts experiencing challenges with students’ emotional intelligence and stability to adopt a policy that specifically details PLCs as an acceptable approach to addressing the rise in students’ needs.

Policy drives our organization, and no priority needs more attention than our students’ social-emotional well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic has rattled our communities, and our students are struggling to emerge from the past few years with a sense of confidence and safety. The Board of Education has a platform to broadcast this need, challenge the existing narrative

that everything is fine in our schools, unify all stakeholders, and demonstrate support for our school leaders and teachers as we commit time, energy, and resources to this effort. PLCs have proven to be consistent and dedicated times in which teachers can analyze student data and discuss their practices to refine their instructional approaches and optimize their impact. Support from the School Board and district leadership would reaffirm the hard work taking place at the building level and reinforce the commitment to supporting our students.

Putting this policy into action and committing PLC time to explore best practices to address SEL in all classrooms will offer students consistently safe spaces where all teachers can provide support in their moment of need. PLCs are currently being used across the district for various purposes, and only District 1234's middle school has piloted an alternative function for these meetings. The positive impact these planning meetings had on students and staff at the middle school can serve as a basis for expanding the initiative to the elementary schools as well. With a unified effort across the district sparked by the recommended revisions in this policy, we can equip teachers with the tools to incorporate SEL in all classrooms across the district and expedite our resolving the SEL crisis occurring amongst our students.

Considerations for Decision Makers

Changing board policies should be done only after investing significant thought regarding how the suggested changes will impact all stakeholders. This analysis of the implications of my proposed revisions details various considerations to be incorporated prior to and into the policy's implementation.

Economic Analysis

The economic impact of my proposed policy will require a significant commitment from the district office and school board. With PLCs being reassigned as meetings to explore optimal

SEL instruction, teachers will need the proper training and support to engage in meaningful planning. As was suggested previously, social workers are needed in District 1234, as they not only serve as a support for students, but they can also enhance the conversations taking place in PLCs. Hiring new staff members is a significant financial cost, but the benefit of having SEL experts within the building can help deliver informal and formal professional development opportunities, saving the district money that would otherwise need to be spent on outside consultants.

Hiring new social workers will also provide a fresh perspective on the current SEL curriculum being delivered for twenty minutes each day. The current curriculum is a compilation of various lessons and artifacts gathered from years of failed curricular efforts. It was previously recommended that the SEL curriculum be evaluated for its value compared to the needs identified by students through the SEL screener and supplemental surveys. Were it determined that the curriculum needs to be revised or overhauled, purchasing new SEL resources could be an added expense to support our PLCs' goals.

The piloted PLC model implemented in this study required that administrators and teachers be present for the planning meetings. The building leaders' presence in the meetings helps reinforce the team's commitment to addressing this urgent need; however, one concerned by the cost of having so many staff members congregating around a common topic might argue that their time is better spent elsewhere. When breaking down each person's salary to hourly compensation, the forty-minute meeting becomes very expensive, especially when administrators participate. Regardless, I believe we will only accomplish growth in this work if we collaborate and respond in a unified manner. Teachers need to know that their administrators believe in their efforts, and building leaders need to be familiar with the strategies being implemented and

discussed to explore more avenues of support for the staff and to demonstrate consistency when working with students. The time working together to benefit students is well spent.

Political Analysis

The political impact of the Board of Education supporting teachers and administrators collaborating around this effort to stabilize and manage our students' current stress and anxiety will be felt from various perspectives, including the staff. Having the support of the Board of Education to prioritize this work will be reassuring and motivating, as the road to success will not be simple or swift. The quantitative data revealed minimal variance in students' grit as a result of the PLCs, demonstrating that substantial long-term change will take more time. We will need to have the support of our community leaders as we navigate difficult conversations and present lessons that challenge students' current understanding, building their emotional intelligence.

As was previously referenced, developing a culture of compassion and flexibility means re-evaluating our priorities and ensuring that while academics remain essential, they no longer rest on a higher pedestal than that of emotional wellness. PLCs will provide teachers with SEL lessons to integrate into every classroom, which may be perceived as taking time away from academic curricula. We must get clear and consistent messaging out to the community to prevent those who oppose replacing academics as the highest priority from stalling our efforts. Communications need to be shared outlining the seamless incorporation of SEL into the classrooms and the continued use of curriculum maps and pacing guides while reporting on the positive impacts of the policy change.

While there will be skeptics, many families in the community will be equally enthused and energized by the mission to address SEL, as they have reported observing a lack of grit and

other integral emotional skills at home. Through communication between home and school, we can envelop students in a consistent environment with shared values and a common language. The narrative spread throughout the community will be one in which we recognize that our students need support, and District 1234 responded to the call. We have invested our resources and energy into this work, and as we see more emotionally intelligent students, we continue to emphasize the importance of academic achievement. District 1234 will be viewed as a lighthouse district, modeling to others how they can prioritize wellness while also achieving academic excellence. The District's echo will become a reality.

Legal Analysis

Offering social-emotional learning for students has been acknowledged by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) as a priority for all schools to emphasize, and the integration of the SEL standards within the school system is highly recommended (ISBE, 2024). Following the Children's Mental Health Act (2003), ISBE collaborated with the Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership to develop ten standards with goals, benchmarks, and performance descriptors. This thorough outline serves as a map for what is expected in schools to provide students with the appropriate social and emotional support as they navigate school. The piloted model of PLCs specifically targeted instructional practices to impact Goal 1: "Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success" (ISBE, 2024). By implementing the proposed policy revisions, all teachers will collaborate to become more effective in delivering high-quality SEL instruction, and students will be the immediate benefactors of our attention to this work.

The Children's Mental Health Act (2003) cites significant concerns over the number of children suffering from mental illness, the lack of support those children are receiving in school,

and the impact it has on their learning and potential for extreme behaviors. Now, following a pandemic in which students were unable to maintain a consistent school schedule without fear of jeopardizing their safety, we find ourselves with an even more desperate need to support our students. The legal implications of implementing this policy change are clear. Schools are expected to support our students' social and emotional needs, and our approach through PLCs is a direct response to their distress.

Moral and Ethical Analysis

There is no question that District 1234 has helped shape students who have grown to be incredibly successful adults. We have contributed to developing positive leaders and citizens impacting our communities daily. The academic excellence that is expected of our students is constant, and our teachers and administrators revel in the yearly rankings and state report cards that list them as a premier middle school and district. Those accolades mean nothing if our students are maladjusted, unstable, anxious, inflexible, and incapable of navigating the world's pressures. We have always prided ourselves on developing the entire child with our current SEL curriculum and existing student services support team. Following the pandemic, we know this is not enough. Our students are desperate for more assistance learning the skills that were lost during years of attending class through a screen and fearing to socialize in public. Unsurprisingly, their social skills are lagging, as socializing was paused for years during a critical time in these students' development.

Wagner (2014) states that there is a significant gap between what even the best schools offer our students and what is required of them as adults. Focusing on traditional content areas is not directly transferable for all students as they pursue their careers and begin their adult lives. In contrast, Wagner suggests that skills such as agility, collaboration, and problem-solving translate

to the work environment and should be emphasized more in schools. We are ethically and morally responsible for providing students with learning that can be applied outside the school building. It is unacceptable to continue prioritizing test scores when an influx of students is barging into the office, pleading for help. Our students need us to respond to their call. They have lost out on several years of traditional schooling, as if they were a dream, and woken up in middle school, an inherently difficult time in a young adolescent's life. The PLC model piloted through this study is a first step in recalibrating our focus and approach and fostering a more supportive and flexible learning environment focused more explicitly on teaching skills that have been lost through a lack of practice or exposure. Adopting my proposed policy change is acknowledgment from the Board of Education that they are aware of the issues and are equally committed to supporting our children through this difficult time.

Conclusion

District 1234, along with many districts across the country, is facing an overwhelming crisis. Our students are struggling with social and emotional challenges following the COVID-19 pandemic, and schools need to adjust their prior practices to offer enhanced support. Through my research, I explored whether we could expedite the delivery of SEL support through PLCs, a collaborative approach already established as a productive method of analyzing data and utilized by many schools and districts to promote academic gains. In addition, I studied whether engaging in this work would increase the staff's confidence in themselves and their peers to deliver meaningful SEL instruction as they partnered to develop and revise their lessons for optimal student learning.

I have found promise in my data that both collective teacher efficacy (CTE) and students' emotional wellness can be positively impacted in only a few months through this intentional

approach. While much of my enthusiasm for this plan's possibilities is based on qualitative data collected through focus groups, teachers and students craved continuing the pilot into the following year. PLCs alone will not resolve the issues we see in building culture or student wellness, however, they do indicate that an emphasis on SEL through establishing trusting collaborative spaces can move the needle in the right direction.

I hope school and district leaders will find my study worthy of replicating in their districts to address their students' social and emotional needs. Additionally, I hope other researchers will expand on my study to establish longitudinal data charting the impact of PLCs on student wellness and collective teacher efficacy and how immediate the results are observed.

Students' and staff's social and emotional well-being cannot be reserved as an afterthought or peripheral focus. We must intentionally foster a community where all stakeholders feel they belong and are equipped with the strategies to navigate their challenges and stresses safely and appropriately. Social and emotional instability was an issue long before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the trauma experienced over the past few years has made the problem grow exponentially. We cannot hide behind academic achievements. We must make the community aware of the challenge, band together, and meet our students where they are with the assistance they need. The entire school system is responsible for providing the resources and energy to adequately increase our support and address the SEL crisis among our students.

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Appendix A

Duckworth 10-Question Grit Survey

Grit Scale

Here are a number of statements that may or may not apply to you. There are no right or wrong answers, so just answer honestly, considering how you compare to most people. At the end, you'll get a score that reflects how passionate and persevering you see yourself to be.

1. New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.

- ☐ Very much like me
- ☐ Mostly like me
- ☐ Somewhat like me
- ☐ Not much like me
- ☐ Not like me at all

2. Setbacks don't discourage me. I don't give up easily.

- ☐ Very much like me
- ☐ Mostly like me
- ☐ Somewhat like me
- ☐ Not much like me
- ☐ Not like me at all

3. I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.

- ☐ Very much like me
- ☐ Mostly like me
- ☐ Somewhat like me
- ☐ Not much like me
- ☐ Not like me at all

4. I am a hard worker.

- ☐ Very much like me
- ☐ Mostly like me
- ☐ Somewhat like me
- ☐ Not much like me
- ☐ Not like me at all

5. I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.

- ☐ Very much like me
- ☐ Mostly like me
- ☐ Somewhat like me
- ☐ Not much like me
- ☐ Not like me at all

6. I finish whatever I begin.

- ☐ Very much like me
- ☐ Mostly like me
- ☐ Somewhat like me
- ☐ Not much like me
- ☐ Not like me at all

7. My interests change from year to year.

- ☐ Very much like me
- ☐ Mostly like me
- ☐ Somewhat like me
- ☐ Not much like me
- ☐ Not like me at all

8. I am diligent. I never give up.

- ☐ Very much like me
- ☐ Mostly like me
- ☐ Somewhat like me
- ☐ Not much like me
- ☐ Not like me at all

9. I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.

- ☐ Very much like me
- ☐ Mostly like me
- ☐ Somewhat like me
- ☐ Not much like me
- ☐ Not like me at all

10. I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge.

- ☐ Very much like me
- ☐ Mostly like me
- ☐ Somewhat like me
- ☐ Not much like me
- ☐ Not like me at all

Appendix B

Goddard et al. 21-Question Collective Efficacy Survey

DIRECTIONS:

**Indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements from
STRONGLY DISAGREE (1) to STRONGLY AGREE (6).**

	Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree
1. Teachers in the school are able to get through to the most difficult students.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. Teachers here are confident they will be able to motivate their students.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. If a child doesn't want to learn teachers here give up.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. Teachers here don't have the skills needed to produce meaningful student learning ..	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. If a child doesn't learn something the first time teachers will try another way.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. Teachers in this school are skilled in various methods of teaching.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. Teachers here are well-prepared to teach the subjects they are assigned to teach.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. Teachers here fail to reach some students because of poor teaching methods.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
9. Teachers in this school have what it takes to get the children to learn.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
10. The lack of instructional materials and supplies makes teaching very difficult.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
11. Teachers in this school do not have the skills to deal with student disciplinary problems.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
12. Teachers in this school think there are some students that no one can reach.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
13. The quality of school facilities here really facilitates the teaching and learning process.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
14. The students here come in with so many advantages they are bound to learn.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
15. These students come to school ready to learn.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
16. Drugs and alcohol abuse in the community make learning difficult for students here.	1	2	3	4	5	6
17. The opportunities in this community help ensure that these students will learn.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
18. Students here just aren't motivated to learn.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
19. Learning is more difficult at this school because students are worried about their safety.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
20. Teachers here need more training to know how to deal with these students.....	1	2	3	4	5	6
21. Teachers in this school truly believe every child can learn.....	1	2	3	4	5	6

Appendix C

Winter Collective Efficacy Staff Survey Results

Question #	SD	D	SWD	SWA	A	SA	Item Total	Item Average
1	0	0	1	10	7	5	108	4.70
2	0	0	0	6	12	5	114	4.96
3	16	7	0	0	0	0	131	5.70
4	21	2	0	0	0	0	136	5.91
5	0	0	0	2	9	12	125	5.43
6	0	0	0	4	8	11	122	5.30
7	0	0	0	0	7	16	131	5.70
8	10	9	4	0	0	0	121	5.26
9	0	0	0	1	11	11	125	5.43
10	19	3	1	0	0	0	133	5.78
11	6	7	5	3	2	0	104	4.52
12	10	9	1	3	0	0	118	5.13
13	0	0	0	1	5	17	131	5.70
14	0	1	4	9	6	3	98	4.26
15	0	0	0	12	9	2	105	4.57
16	16	7	0	0	0	0	131	5.70
17	0	0	0	5	10	8	118	5.13
18	10	11	1	1	0	0	122	5.30
19	16	6	1	0	0	0	130	5.65
20	4	3	4	8	4	0	87	3.78
21	0	0	1	1	7	14	126	5.48
						Collective Efficacy Sum		2516.00
						Collective Efficacy Average		5.21
						Standard Deviation		0.5623041058

Appendix D

Spring Collective Efficacy Staff Survey Results

Question #	SD	D	SWD	SWA	A	SA	Item Total	Item Average
1	0	0	3	6	5	6	94	4.70
2	0	0	1	7	7	5	96	4.80
3	9	8	1	2	0	0	104	5.20
4	15	5	0	0	0	0	115	5.75
5	0	0	2	0	9	9	105	5.25
6	0	0	1	2	6	11	107	5.35
7	0	0	0	0	7	13	113	5.65
8	8	10	1	1	0	0	105	5.25
9	0	0	0	3	9	7	99	5.21
10	16	2	1	0	0	0	110	5.79
11	5	4	5	4	2	0	86	4.30
12	7	6	3	3	1	0	95	4.75
13	0	1	0	1	6	12	108	5.40
14	0	1	3	5	6	5	91	4.55
15	0	0	1	10	8	1	89	4.45
16	16	3	1	0	0	0	115	5.75
17	0	0	0	5	9	6	101	5.05
18	8	9	1	1	0	0	100	5.26
19	14	6	0	0	0	0	114	5.70
20	3	3	3	6	3	2	71	3.55
21	0	0	0	4	7	9	105	5.25
Collective Efficacy Sum							2123.00	
Collective Efficacy Average							5.09	
Standard Deviation							0.5654013479	

Appendix E

Comparison of Collective Efficacy Staff Survey Results (Winter and Spring)

Question #	Item Average (Feb)	Item Average (May)	Difference
1	4.70	4.70	0.00
2	4.96	4.80	-0.16
3	5.70	5.20	-0.50
4	5.91	5.75	-0.16
5	5.43	5.25	-0.18
6	5.30	5.35	0.05
7	5.70	5.65	-0.05
8	5.26	5.25	-0.01
9	5.43	5.21	-0.22
10	5.78	5.79	0.01
11	4.52	4.30	-0.22
12	5.13	4.75	-0.38
13	5.70	5.40	-0.30
14	4.26	4.55	0.29
15	4.57	4.45	-0.12
16	5.70	5.75	0.05
17	5.13	5.05	-0.08
18	5.30	5.26	-0.04
19	5.65	5.70	0.05
20	3.78	3.55	-0.23
21	5.48	5.25	-0.23

Appendix F

Teacher Focus Group Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. What subject and grade level(s) do you teach?
2. How long have you been a teacher?
3. How long have you taught at this school?
4. What was your experience like working in the PLC?
5. How did you implement strategies in your classroom that were discussed at the PLC?
6. What did you notice in student behavior or performance as a result of work done in the PLCs?
7. Have you worked in a PLC before this year? If so, how did this experience compare to previous ones?
8. What did you appreciate most about the PLC experience? What is one suggestion for change after completing three months of the PLC model?
9. How has working within this PLC model impacted the way you view your job and/or colleagues?
10. How has working within this PLC model impacted the manner in which you collaborate with your colleagues?
11. How do you feel the PLC pilot was effective?
12. How do you feel your students grew in grit as a result of this PLC model?
13. Is there anything else you would like to share related to the PLC structure or the emphasis on grit?

Appendix G

Student Focus Group Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. What grade are you in?
2. How long have you been at this school?
3. What's your favorite class and why?
4. What do you think is most important for you to learn while in middle school?
5. What do you think teachers would say is most important for you to learn while you're in middle school?
6. How do you define grit?
7. How have you demonstrated grit in and/or out of school?
8. Has your level of grit changed during your middle school experience? Why or why not?
9. How have your teachers specifically impacted your level of grit?
10. Have you noticed a specific focus on grit in your classrooms this year? If so, please explain.
11. Is there anything else you'd like to share regarding your experience with grit in middle school?

Appendix H

PLC Observational Form

Team Number of
Members Present Team Recognizes Growth Through Observations of Grit ☐ Y ☐ NTime Spent Reviewing
Celebrations

Summary of Celebrations Shared

Time Spent on Presenter's Data
and Feedback Data Shared By Presenter
Focused On...How Many PLC Members
Offered Presenter Feedback?The Presenter Received Valuable
Feedback to Formulate a Plan to
Meet Students' Needs

Strongly Disagree

Strongly Agree

1	2	3	4	5
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Notes Presenter Received As Feedback

Appendix I

4 C's As-Is Diagram

Culture

- Teachers' and the District's relationships have recently been strained following the implementation of COVID protocols and contract negotiations.
- Teachers work in silos and some experience discomfort with being vulnerable around colleagues.
- School culture with high expectations of student achievement.
- Teachers face pressure to demonstrate student achievement through test scores.
- Community is quick to blame teachers for student struggles.

**As-Is: 4 C's Analysis for
PLCs with an SEL Focus**

**Conditions**

- Innovative and new school facility.
- A bell schedule and teaching schedule that does not prioritize collaboration.
- A sense of self-preservation among staff to ensure that collaboration does not infringe on their personal time.
- No consistent structures to facilitate collaboration.
- Some teachers do not have job-alike peers.
- Teachers are faced with many initiatives, and SEL, while important to the staff, does not receive the same attention as academics.

Competencies

- A lack of understanding by faculty to effectively collaborate in teams with an interdependent relationship for success.
- Inconsistent stakeholder understanding of students' SEL needs.
- Staff are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with collecting, analyzing, and utilizing data to inform instruction.

Context

- Evidence of increased SEL needs among middle school students following COVID pandemic.
- Affluent and highly educated community with collaborative, involved, and engaged families.
- Diverse student body with homogenous staff.
- History of fostering high-achieving students.

Appendix J

4 C's To-Be Diagram

**Culture**

- Teachers and the District have an aligned vision of best practices for supporting students.
- School fosters culture of high expectations for student achievement, while supporting and prioritizing SEL needs as well.
- Teachers receive support for promoting student achievement. Community recognizes the hard work teachers put in to educating the entire student, which motivates teachers to always go above and beyond for their students.
- Teachers work collaboratively during their plan periods and value the team support and input they receive from their colleagues during PLCs.

Competencies

- Clarity outlining the requirements and structures to collaborate in teams effectively with an interdependent relationship for success becomes the focus of professional development.
- Aligned and unified understanding of student SEL needs
- Staff are trained to collect, analyze, and utilize student data to inform instruction.
- Staff conduct PLCs consistently and with fidelity.

**To-Be: 4 C's Analysis for
PLCs with an SEL Focus**

**Conditions**

- The innovative and new school facility is optimally used.
- Implement a revised teaching schedule prioritizing collaboration with more planning periods committed to teaming.
- Staff puts their own needs secondary to ensure that collaboration remains the priority, benefiting students' SEL needs
- Consistent structures are designed and implemented to facilitate collaboration.
- Prioritize teachers having job-alike peers.
- Initiatives are streamlined to prioritize SEL.
- Teachers are offered PD and team time to conduct meaningful PLCs to collect and analyze student data and inform their practices.

**Context**

- Impact of COVID pandemic reduces as student risk assessments, DCFS calls, and police referrals decrease due to SEL needs being addressed.
- Affluent and highly educated community with collaborative, involved, and engaged families.
- Diverse student body with heterogeneous staff.
- Continue fostering high-achieving students.