



IT WORKED!

Professional Learning Communities and Priority Standards through the District Lens

Beth Pesnell

*Math and Science Curriculum
Specialist*

Rogers Public Schools, AR

Over the past three years, our district has focused on implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). The first step within a PLC is to determine the “what”—what is it we want students to learn? In grade level PLCs, this step starts a prioritizing process of the standards in which we separate “essential standards” or “need to knows” from those standards that aren’t necessarily essential to the main work of the grade level—the “nice-to-knows”. But a huge question is always, *how do you prioritize when everything feels like a priority?* As this work grew across our district, it became obvious that some district-level guidance would be needed to create a consistent, viable curriculum district-wide, but we didn’t want to obstruct the true heart of the PLC process by simply dictating these “essential” standards.

One of my roles as our district elementary math and science curriculum specialist is to lead the math curriculum efforts and guide our building-level instructional facilitators in implementation of this curriculum. In an effort to cultivate a shared vision of essential standards in elementary mathematics, I led our instructional facilitators through a process that in turn influenced their building level work in PLCs and promoted equity across the district’s 15 elementary schools.

We began by reading selections about power standards and priority standards written by Larry Ainsworth and Doug Reeves so that we would have a common language and shared knowledge. We used the idea that “standards should either play a starring role or a supporting role in each grade level” to focus our thinking as we worked to select priority standards in each grade level. When determining if a standard had a “starring role”, we considered three questions:

1. Does it have endurance?
2. Does it have leverage?
3. Does it develop readiness for the next level of learning?

We used a protocol for selecting priority standards that allowed us to have a voice in the process, at both an individual and collective level. We began by processing individually and then sharing our thoughts in small groups. Each small group had to reach a consensus about the priority standards in the grade level and then came back together as a whole group to create a final consensus, negotiating our thinking in the process. As we selected standards, we were careful to look for those that were more comprehensive or rigorous, as suggested, because if a student can do those, they can do the standards that are more foundational too. This decision to look at the more comprehensive or rigorous standard as the “essential” was a bit uncomfortable at first, but as we continued our revision process we understood the true power in seeing these standards as the essentials.

By selecting the priority standards together for each grade level, we created a shared vision and direction for our district. We decided not to immediately publish and distribute this work through a district document but to let our facilitators use our collective work to help guide their building level PLCs, promoting the shared learning by their teachers in the process. Later that spring, we used our priority standards to drive our district curriculum revisions and crafted essential questions that would guide our teachers to push their instruction through the lens of these more rigorous and comprehensive standards. This process gave us a deeper understanding of the coherence of standards both within grade levels and vertically throughout the K-5 standards, as well as creating guidance and direction for our district that in turn will provide greater equity in math instruction throughout our 15 schools.

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