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# Why Music Matters: How Participation in a Professional Learning Community can Expand the Role of Music Educators

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## Abstract

*Facing steady decline and elimination of music programs due to high-stakes testing coupled with tighter budgets, music educators are searching for ways to show their relevancy within an accountability culture. One potential way for a music educator to contribute to student achievement is through participation in a professional learning community (PLC) with academic teachers to support their shared students' learning. The purpose of this study was to document the PLC collaborative experiences of a music educator and two core academic subject teachers who worked together to understand, develop, implement, and assess how the music teacher can support academic teachers in meeting the science and mathematics learning needs of under-represented students. Data analyzed included verbatim transcripts from eight audiotaped PLC meetings, as well as student artifacts and teacher journal entries. This article reports on three themes that emerged across the data: long-term relationships and contextual knowledge; infusion of music to support academic learning; and use of multi-grade classrooms. These themes reflect how collaborative work between a music teacher and academic teachers within a PLC can lead to changes in teacher practice to better support learning for all students.*

Nationally, there has been a steady decline and elimination of music programs due to increased accountability and high-stakes testing coupled with tighter budgets due to less funding. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 shifted educational priorities toward subjects assessed on standardized achievement tests (Major, 2013). This unfunded mandate has resulted in a reduction of class time for untested subject areas or their complete elimination (McMurrer, 2007). There is a large body of research touting the value of music education in schools, but music classes tend to be one of the first areas affected by state budget cuts (Abril & Gault, 2008; Education Commission of the States, 2006; Gerrity, 2009; Schultz, 2006). In 2011, the Florida education budget was cut by one billion dollars. In many districts, those budget cuts eliminated teaching positions in voluntary pre-kindergarten, art, physical education, and music. The National Association of State Budget officers found that K–12 public education budget cuts will “reduce or eliminate personnel and programs vital to the most vulnerable populations: lower-income and minority students” (Bryant, 2011).

These vulnerable and often invisible populations are also frequently associated with the achievement gap, the observed, persistent disparity of educational measures between the performances of groups of students, especially groups defined by socioeconomic status (SES), race/ethnicity, and gender

(Hidden Curriculum, 2014). Ladson–Billings (2007) redefined the achievement gap as the opportunity gap. The opportunity gap encompasses disparities in teacher quality, curricula, school funding, healthcare, wealth, education, affordable housing, and quality childcare (Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Carter & Welner, 2013). While some scholars believe the social inequalities driven by the opportunity gap are too extensive for schools to significantly impact the achievement gap, others maintain that with high quality teachers, rigorous curricula, and continuous support through professional learning, teachers can significantly impact the opportunity gap (Holland, 2007).

Schools can mitigate the opportunity gap by dividing it into the expectations gap, the relationships gap, and the participation gap (Quaglia, Fox, & Corso, 2010). The expectations gap includes the expectations teachers hold for individual students as well as the difference between “students’ expectations of themselves and what they perceive to be the teachers’ opinion of their potential” (Quaglia, et al., 2010, para. 3). The relationship gap is directly linked to the quality of teacher–student relationships and student effort. Research shows the relationships students have with teachers is one of the best predictors of hard work and engagement (Osterman, 2000). There is evidence that programs emphasizing teaching and connectedness are a more effective way to meet the needs of students (Barrett & Lamy, 2013). The participation gap addresses the opportunities afforded to the few students who are actively involved and participating in the life of the school. According to MacDonald (2014), each of these three gaps holds the potential to reduce the achievement gap between black and white students as each gap is actively addressed by school personnel and by classroom teachers.

Music educators are in a unique position to address these three gaps by working to link success in music to the academic experiences of their students. If a music teacher takes responsibility for linking music achievement to academic achievement, particularly in relationship to meeting the needs of students who enter school with an opportunity gap, they may be perceived as more relevant within the current era of high–stakes testing and accountability. The National Association for Music Education has lobbied diligently and campaigned aggressively to keep music in our schools. With limited empirical evidence and many qualitative studies presenting predominantly correlational evidence, the effort to keep music in our schools has been less than effective. Cuts in music teacher positions in my state and district are an ever–present reality and are increasing at an alarming rate (Gerrity, 2009; Major, 2013, McMurrer, 2007; Schultz, 2006).

As a music teacher in the state of Florida with thirty years of experience, I have observed a steady reduction of many elective teachers, including music teachers. Particularly in the past ten years, reducing art and music positions to halftime, leaving vacancies open after retirement, teaching reading out of field, sharing halftime teachers between schools, or completely eliminating music programs has been a consistent theme. Music conferences at the local, state, and national levels are filled with discussions of the relevancy of music and the necessary steps to provide evidence of the value of music education in the schools. One way to show relevancy is through connections between music and academic achievement.

Music researchers, working for the last two decades to establish a link between the arts and academic achievement, have shown collective progress in identifying a positive relationship between music and the learning that takes place in other subject areas. Scripp (2002) found, however, that “the authors of these meta-analyses caution against over-reaching claims of causal relationships between music and academic achievement and recommend further *practitioner research* is needed to specify how these links can be best and most consistently achieved” (p. 143).

As the middle and high school choral instructor in a K–12 school, I engaged in practitioner research to better understand the role I can play in collaborating with academic teachers to support the academic achievement of students who enter our school with an opportunity gap. The focus of the collaboration was to identify and develop connections between students’ experiences in music class and their academic coursework. To achieve this end, as a music educator, I initiated, facilitated and fully participated in a professional learning community with two academic teachers.

I have observed children who are extremely talented musically but who struggle to be successful in their academic classes. For the first 21 years of my career, I taught in isolation without any collaborative support, but that changed when I began to teach at a Developmental Research School. The school serves approximately 1150 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade. The school is designed as a special school district under the Department of Education funding and is given the responsibility to develop innovative solutions to educational concerns in the state and to disseminate successful instructional programs to other school districts.

The research school enrolls a student population that reflects the demographic composition of the student age population of the state. To fulfill its

mission statement, identified as “collaborating to meet the needs of each child,” one of the primary roles of the school is to develop, evaluate, and disseminate exemplary programs of education. Teacher inquiry, a mechanism for teacher professional development, is an important part of the school’s research mission and faculty scholarship. Teacher inquiry projects are carried out yearly. As both a middle and high school choral director, I became immersed in teacher inquiry and began a yearly process of analyzing my own practice while working closely with other teachers in a professional learning community. The relationships built with these teachers and the common goal of making a difference in the lives of our students changed and enriched my teaching practice.

First, as the middle school performing arts teacher and then as the high school choral director at my school, I continually observed the difficult transition from middle school to high school math and science for many of my African–American students. Their musical ability and talent placed them in elite high school music performance ensembles, but the opportunity gap continued to affect their other academic classes (most drastically in biology and geometry). I wondered if there was something that could be done to support the learning of students who displayed a high degree of musical talent and commitment, but who struggled to be successful in their math and science classes.

Through several years of collaboration, I formed strong relationships with the ninth grade biology and geometry teachers who shared my concern about the number of students who struggled to make a successful transition into high school. These educators and I shared a passion for closing the opportunity gap for at-risk students at our school. Through collaborative dialogue about how to close the opportunity gap for these at-risk students, we began to recognize the possible link between music and academic classes and agreed to create a professional learning community (PLC) consisting of the biology teacher, the geometry teacher and me. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are small groups of teachers who meet on a regular basis to engage in critical, reflective dialogue to better understand their own teaching practice (Dana & Yendol–Hoppey, 2008). We knew that as teachers begin conversations with other educators about their work and their understanding of data regarding student learning, they are able to “draw upon and incorporate each other’s expertise to create rich conversations and new insights into teaching and learning” (Putnam & Borko, 2000, p. 8). Our goal was to systematically and intentionally explore the ways our students’ experiences in my high school chorus classes and their geometry and biology classes might work in concert to help students succeed both musically and academically despite the presence of an opportunity gap.

## **PURPOSE STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The purpose of this research was to document the collaborative experiences of a group of ninth grade educators who worked together to understand, develop, implement, and assess the ways in which the music teacher can support academic teachers in meeting the science and mathematics learning needs of their shared student population.

The primary research question explored was: In what ways can I, as a music educator, use my knowledge of music and the students I teach to support the math and science learning of my students through collaborative work with their academic teachers within a professional learning community? Sub-questions I explored included the following:

- What connections might be made between students' experiences in music class and their academic coursework to support their learning in science and math?
- How does a PLC consisting of a music teacher and two academic teachers best function to achieve this goal?

## **METHODOLOGY**

Mickey Macdonald, the biology teacher; Kristin Weller, the geometry teacher; and I began with an initial understanding of our shared values and concerns regarding our 9<sup>th</sup> grade student population who were all female during the 2014–2015 school year. We were critically aware of the assessment that Halpern et al. (2007) noted when “girls, particularly as they move out of elementary school and into middle and high school and beyond, often underestimate their abilities in mathematics and science” (p. 6).

Participation in a professional learning community (PLC) allowed us to act on these shared understandings. Central to the work of this PLC was the collectively constructed meaning of shared data and its possible use to improve students' academic achievement as well as teachers' experiences in the classroom. As I developed an eight-week PLC with two ninth grade teachers to address specific academic learning needs of our shared students, I also engaged in practitioner research to better understand and meet the needs of my ninth grade female music students.

A protocol was developed to systematically explore the relationship the music teacher could have with the academic teachers to support student learning (refer to Appendix A). This protocol helped us identify and discuss our shared students' academic needs in a carefully planned and scaffolded way and helped us identify how a music teacher can support academic teachers in meeting the learning needs of ninth grade female students.

The PLC protocol established the following schedule: 10 minutes spent reviewing student performance within our classes, 20 minutes for academic teachers to identify the kinds of activities or lessons coming up in the next week and any difficulties students might have negotiating the content of these activities and/or lessons, 20 minutes devoted to exploring ways the music teacher could provide support for student learning by linking students' experiences in music classes with their academic learning, and 10 minutes to reflect on the process of the PLC meeting—what went well, what we learned, and what might be adjusted within the protocol to improve future meetings.

During the 2014–2015 academic year, the time frame for this study, my class consisted of eight freshmen, seven sophomores, two juniors, and seven seniors. I was the middle school performing arts teacher for seven of the eight freshmen in this choral ensemble. There were three African–American female students in the ensemble, including two seniors and one freshman, who had been very successful in music, but struggled academically. The PLC's work began with the intent of focusing on African-American ninth grade female students however, very early in the research it became clear that most of the female students we shared across the choral ensemble, geometry, and biology were not performing to the best of their abilities in math and science, and all could benefit from support. This revelation compelled us to change the focus of the study to include all ninth grade female students we had in common.

In our first discussion to set up the PLC meetings, Mickey and Kristin each explained their curriculum and their concerns regarding the students' grades. We then identified and discussed the ninth grade students we shared, and I provided general information about each student's background and family, including their guardians' marital status, birth order, siblings at home and away in college, prior experiences in the performing arts program, entry date of student to the school, extra-curricular activities, and any additional information that I was privy to due to my extended relationship with some of the families' older siblings since 2007 when I began working at this school (see Table 3-1).

Table 3-1. Student Demographics and Family Connections

| Student pseudonyms | Parent status                  | # of siblings | Parent(s) volunteer | After school activities    | Birth order | Ethnic origin | Harris contact |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|---------------|---------------------|----------------------------|-------------|---------------|----------------|
| Kayla              | Parents divorced/<br>remarried | 2             | Yes                 | Yes                        | Middle      | W             | 2007           |
| Hilary             | Parents married                | 5             | Yes                 | Yes                        | Baby        | W             | 2007           |
| Sara               | Parents married                | 2             | Yes                 | Yes                        | Baby        | W             | 2007           |
| Susan              | Does not live with parents     | 0             | No                  | Limited to performing arts | Only        | B             | 2011           |
| Stephanie          | Parents married                | 0             | Yes                 | Yes                        | Only        | W             | 2011           |
| Ann                | Parents married                | 3             | Yes                 | Yes                        | Baby        | W             | 2010           |

Through this collaboration, we recognized the potential for improving student learning by improving our practices. Data analyzed included verbatim transcripts from eight audiotaped PLC meetings, as well as student artifacts from the eight female students we shared, and teacher journal entries.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was formative and summative in nature. Formative data analysis, as an iterative process, took place throughout the inquiry process. Between PLC meetings, I listened to audio recordings of each meeting and transcribed verbatim the dialogue that transpired as well as read and reread my own journal entries generated between the meetings. I used what I learned from transcription and journal reading to make decisions about how best to proceed with the next PLC meeting. I also used what I learned from these transcriptions and journal readings to inform any actions I took as a music teacher to support the academic learning of my ninth grade female students who excelled in music but struggled academically. Through the formative data analysis process, I continually reflected on my classroom experiences as a music teacher to inform our PLC work.

At the conclusion of the eight weeks, in addition to formative analysis of the data, I engaged in summative analysis by reviewing the entire data set that had been collected over the course of the study. My research questions provided an organizational structure as I worked to make sense of the data. Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2008) report the two most frequently used methods to facilitate data analysis are coding and memoing. Schwandt's (1997) *Qualitative Inquiry: A*



*Dictionary of Terms* defines coding as “a procedure that disaggregates the data, breaks it down into manageable segments and identifies or names those segments [...and] requires constantly comparing and contrasting various successive segments of the data and subsequently categorizing them” (p. 16). Glaser (1978) suggests memoing to explain or elaborate on the coded categories that the researcher develops in analyzing data:

Memos are conceptual in intent, vary in length, and are primarily written to oneself. Content can include commentary on the meaning of a coded category, explanation of a sense of pattern developing among categories, or a description of some specific aspect of a setting or phenomenon. The final analysis and interpretation typically is based on integration and analysis of memos. (pp. 89–90)

Using these processes, I described, classified and interpreted the data (Creswell, 2013).

First, I analyzed the transcribed notes from the PLC meetings to find common patterns. Codes were then assigned, identifying patterns of words and phrases from transcripts and written reflections that emerged from the data. Particular attention was paid to *in vivo* codes, which are derived from the participants’ exact words. Themes and/or stories emerged from this coding process. I referred to the literature on music and its impact on academic classes as well as prominent themes that have been developed to interpret what the data meant and how the story that unfolded from the data informed my study’s purpose. Implications for the key themes and findings were then considered and applied to how the data answered my research questions, and I noted new questions that emerged as a result of data analysis. Finally, I used the questions outlined in Dana & Yendol–Hoppey’s book, *The Reflective Educator’s Guide to Classroom Research* (2014), to reflect on the data:

- What have I learned about myself as a music teacher?
- What have I learned about the students we share as a PLC?
- What have I learned about the larger context of schools and schooling?
- What are the implications of what I have learned on my teaching?
- What changes might I make in my practice?
- What new wonderings do I have?

## THEMES AND CONCLUSIONS

Through data analysis of my collaboration within the PLC, three themes emerged related to the ways that I, as a music educator, can use my knowledge of music and the students I teach to support the math and science learning of my students. These themes included:

1. long-term relationships and contextual knowledge
2. infusion of music to support academic learning
3. use of multi-grade classrooms

### **Theme One: Long-term Relationships and Contextual Knowledge**

The first theme that is present across all PLC meetings is long-term relationships and contextual knowledge. This theme is defined as the recognition and utilization of knowledge gathered by the music educator as a result of teaching students over multiple years a relational history that enabled me, as the music educator, to provide illuminating information to the academic teachers regarding individual student learning, after-school and extra-curricular activities, and the family dynamics for each child that could potentially impact their academic learning.

There were thirty-one separate instances during the PLC meetings when I shared knowledge about the students we were all teaching that I developed through years of teaching the students. Several of these instances led to student interventions that I implemented as a result of the information shared during the PLC meeting and the relationships I developed with the students over time. For example, because I had taught Hilary for several years, I knew she struggled in the classroom to focus on her work. I also had knowledge of her siblings' learning challenges, information I shared with the PLC initially and when concerns about Hillary's grades were discussed at PLC meetings over time. My nine-year relationship with Hilary and her family created an opportunity for me to call her parents to develop an action plan to improve Hilary's academic success. Similar instances occurred with Susan, Sara, Ann, Kayla, Stephanie, Melissa, and Beth. Overall, there were thirteen instances when Mickey and/or Kristin requested my assistance with specific students by using my student-teacher relationship or my teacher-parent/guardian relationship to try to amend a student's behavior or work ethic. Prior to participating in PLC work, it was necessary for me, as the music educator, to reach out and connect with core teachers in order to make the knowledge I had of students useful to them. The PLC, however, became a unique vehicle that afforded full use of the student knowledge I possessed, gleaned

through multiple years of contact with students and their families.

Because music educators often teach students for multiple years, they have the opportunity to develop strong relationships with their students and develop knowledge about students and their families that could serve academic teachers well. Hence, one valuable contribution music educators can make in PLC work, when they participate in this professional development endeavor, is relaying information to academic teachers about students that might provide insights into struggles students are having in mastering academic content. As a result, academic teachers can call upon music educators to communicate with students and families the need to focus on academics. Because of long-term relationships developed over an extended period of time, music educators may prove influential in encouraging students to focus on matters associated with their academic classes while addressing the opportunity gap through use of the relationship gap.

### **Theme Two: Infusion of Music to Support Academic Learning**

The second theme that was present throughout the PLC work is the infusion of music to support academic learning. Building on the potential established as a result of the first theme, music educators purposefully make connections between music class and academic classes in support of student academic learning. The professional learning community's use of the protocol developed for the PLC provided an opportunity for Mickey, Kristin and I to brainstorm how the knowledge of our specific subject areas might be infused to support our students. By working together, we specifically addressed the kinds of connections that we could make between students' experiences in music class and their academic coursework, and thereby implement a system of support for our students through the use of the expectation gap.

For example, one specific way I connected music class to academic coursework was by researching, teaching, and encouraging student use of music as a mnemonic device to memorize formulas they needed for their geometry End-of-Course (EOC) assessment. The EOC assessments are a state driven, high stakes assessment of yearly achievement, and ninth grade students have an End of Course assessment in geometry and biology. During the first PLC meeting, Kristin shared her concern regarding the critical need for her students to memorize all geometric formulas needed for the EOC assessment. In reaction to her concern, I investigated the possible support I might provide our students through music and reported my findings in the second PLC meeting regarding the possible use of a musical memory device to learn the geometric formulas. Kristin expressed interest in making the online sources available to all of her ninth grade

geometry students. Within that next week, my music students were introduced to the websites that were specifically designed to help students memorize mathematical formulas using simple children's songs as a memory device. By integrating this concept into my curriculum, I was able to infuse math into a music classroom through basic vocal exercises and visual images that provided the academic support students needed in geometry. Students reported using the songs to remember the formulas during their study time and the geometry End-of-Course (EOC) assessment.

When music educators participate in a PLC with academic teachers, they have the opportunity to learn about the content being covered in other classes and look for ways to use both their class time and music itself to support students in mastering material covered in their academic coursework. Addressing the opportunity gap through maintaining high expectations can become one goal of PLC work as it unfolds over time and helps academic teachers see value in their students' participation in music class when it is directly related to their students' academic learning.

### **Theme Three: The Use of Multi-grade Classrooms**

A third theme that emerged from analyzing our PLC meetings over time related to moments that occurred in my choral class between PLC meetings when I was discussing geometry and biology coursework with my ninth grade learners. Several times, the older students in the class contributed to our discussions. Music classes that contain students from multiple grade levels provide opportunities for older students to mentor younger students in their academic coursework experiences.

Admission into this choral ensemble is based on talent, not age, hence the multi-grade classroom. This unique structure provided opportunities for sophomores, juniors, and seniors to share experiences and wisdom with the ninth grade students about geometry and biology. For example, in early March when I presented the memory devices for learning the geometric formulas, the upper classmen commented on the importance of learning the formulas for the EOC assessment. The multi-grade choral classroom provided an opportunity for peer counseling, leadership, and tutoring. I observed the upperclassmen in the choral ensemble commenting on the pitfalls of omitting homework and sharing their perception of the necessity for making up missed work while on fieldtrips or competitions for our vocal group. Furthermore, I observed sophomores sharing the value of the after-school help sessions for their successful completion of the EOC assessment the previous year and the incentive to retest to improve your

grade for a higher score. Seniors were reflective regarding student work ethic and the damaging effect of a low GPA on potential college choices.

Because music classrooms, particularly when they are audition-based groups, often consist of students from multiple grade levels, they provide potential opportunities for older students to support younger students experiencing academic difficulties. Music educators can facilitate such interaction to encourage younger students to keep up with academic work during times they are taken out of academic classes for music class related activities. Music educators can also encourage such mentoring between multi-aged students in their classes when their awareness is raised about what academic work is transpiring through participation in a PLC. The opportunity gap is subsequently addressed for students through participation for all ages of students in the multi-grade classroom.

### **Implications for Others**

This study provides music educators with concrete examples of how they can use their knowledge of music to creatively support the work of other teachers and draw on their multi-year student-teacher relationships to support core teachers who often teach students for only one year. By reaching out and participating in professional learning communities and looking for ways to integrate their knowledge of music with the core teachers' efforts to overcome the opportunity gap, music educators position themselves as a relevant and valuable part of the fabric of the core teaching staff within a school system. A chart explaining how to set up a professional learning community that includes music educators is in Appendix B. This chart outlines the structure related to getting started, garnering support from administrators, reaching out to core faculty, identifying student needs, and avoiding potential pitfalls.

In the last twenty years, music researchers have shown collective progress in working to establish a link between the arts and academic achievement by identifying a positive correlation between music education and learning in other subject areas, but how this relationship functioned in the classroom and school needed further research (Scripp, 2002). Findings from this study may prove useful to music educators who want to better understand the relationship between music and learning in other subject areas and may strengthen the argument to retain music in our schools. This study illuminates the unique nature of a multi-year teacher in a multi-age classroom and how that status can impact the structure and outcome of collaborative work within a professional learning community. Hence, this study could be used for further discussions about the importance of multi-

year teachers and their impact on student academic achievement. The members of my professional learning community had well over fifty years of combined teaching experience and knowledge regarding their specific subject areas. Their knowledge of individual students, however, was limited to five months of contact time, whereas my status as a multi-year teacher brought, in some cases, as much as nine years of experience with the students and families contained in this study. As researchers strive to bring forward evidence of the importance of music in our schools, and multi-year teachers assume roles as liaisons between core teachers and students and families, the findings of this study might inspire other educators to participate in a professional learning community as a multi-year educator.

### **Specific Implications for My Own Practice**

An outcome of this study was the personal exploration of my own practice and my role as a music educator in a professional learning community. The most important part of my work as a music educator is to provide an environment that supports life-long learning in music and connects students to the school as a community. My role and responsibility as a multi-year teacher is to advocate for my students, using my multi-year status and the relationships that I build with my students and their families to work as a liaison between my students and their core teachers to promote and support academic success. This study has changed my perspective on how I can function as a music educator within a school by giving me a new confidence in the potential systems of support I can provide students and faculty. As a music educator and multi-year teacher, I plan to use what I have learned from this professional learning community in future opportunities where I can implement these systems of support.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The existing literature regarding the importance of music education is predominantly based on studies that recount the effect of music on student academic achievement and provide evidence of “the consistently strong, positive relationship between music and learning in other subjects areas...[and yet] caution against over-reaching claims of causal relationships between music and academic achievement” (Scripp, 2002, p. 143). In contrast, this study, fueled by the recommendation that “further practitioner research is needed to specify how these links can be best and most consistently achieved” (Scripp, 2002, p. 143), was conducted collaboratively in a professional learning community with and by teachers who constructed and implemented an action plan designed to support a cohort of ninth grade female students using my multi-year student-teacher relationships and knowledge of music. The experience of working in a

collaborative professional learning environment to study my practice, support my colleagues, and advocate for my students continues to be an enriching and significant learning experience. Therefore, one recommendation for further research is additional inquiry by other multi-year teachers investigating their potential role within a professional learning community and the unique nature of working as a liaison. Guided by their wonderings about their own subject area, their work with core teachers, and the support they provide to students they all share, the research completed by other multi-year teachers might expand upon this study and make it richer.

## **Conclusion**

Including the music educator as a resource for implementation of specific systems of support can impact student academic learning outcomes. A music educator's knowledge of music and how other teachers can leverage that knowledge of music to support their classrooms is an untapped resource. Multi-year teachers often have a deep, rich knowledge base about individual students due to their multi-year relationships and multi-grade level student population in their classrooms. This knowledge base can become a critical source of information for core teachers as they encounter issues with students in their classrooms. Within a professional learning community, by tapping into a music educator's knowledge of music, a music educator's continuous and evolving knowledge of students through repetitive contact within multiple years, and a music educator's classroom context containing a multi-age population of students within a music ensemble, educators are better able to address the opportunity gap and the needs of their students.

## APPENDIX A: PROTOCOL DESIGN

### **PLC DISCUSSION PROTOCOL: CONNECTING MUSIC AND ACADEMIC LEARNING**

*Developed by Melanie Harris*

**Suggested Group Size: 3 – 6**  
**Suggested Time Frame: 60 MINUTES**

**Step One: Reviewing Student Performance** (10 –15 Minutes) - Each teacher in the PLC will share reflections on how the students we all teach and are focusing our PLC efforts on better understanding and supporting performed in music and academic classes during the prior week. Questions that may be used to guide this 10-minute discussion include:

- How did (student name) perform in geometry/biology/music class this past week?
- What were some strengths exhibited in the student’s performance?
- What were some areas of concern exhibited in the student’s performance?

During this step, PLC members may share documents (student produced work) with one another to enhance discussion of student performance.

**Step Two: Looking Ahead** (15-20 Minutes) – The academic teachers in the PLC each take a turn identifying the kinds of activities or lessons that are coming up in the next week and predicting the ways our students might have difficulty negotiating the content of these activities/lessons. During this step, PLC members may share documents (such as lesson plans, student handouts, etc.) with one another to enhance discussion of upcoming activities/lessons.

**Step Three: Connecting Music and Academics** (20 Minutes) - Focused brainstorming and discussion exploring any possible ways the music teacher can provide support for students’ learning of the upcoming academic content being taught by the geometry and biology teachers by linking students’ experiences in music classes with their academic learning.

**Step Four: PLC Debrief** (10 Minutes) PLC members reflect in writing and/or orally on how the discussion worked for the group. Prompts for written/oral discussion include:

- Something that worked well for me at this meeting was ...
- One way to improve our PLC meetings might be...
- The most important learning that occurred for me as a result of this PLC meeting was...
- One word that describes how I feel about the content of today’s PLC meeting is. Why I chose that word:...

## APPENDIX B



## **A GUIDE FOR THE MUSIC EDUCATOR IN A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY**

|                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Getting started                | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Identify the academic needs of the music student population you teach.</li><li>2. Note specific classes where students are failing</li></ol>  |
| Garner administrative support  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Discuss with your administration the potential of using music and other multi-year teachers' knowledge of students to support core academic teachers.</li><li>2. Provide a list of specific students that may be in need of support to your administrator.</li><li>3. Suggest meeting with other multi-year teachers, coaches, electives, deans, and guidance counselors to gather specific student knowledge that may be immediately helpful at the beginning of the year to classroom teachers.</li><li>4. Discuss a weekly rotation of elective teachers through grade level meetings early in the year as a possible way to address information across multiple grade levels.</li></ol> |
| Reach out to academic teachers | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Email a list of all music students including grade level, and all known extracurricular activities (i.e., Marching Band, Musical, Show Choir, Voice/ Dance lessons, athletics, etc.) to all teachers.</li><li>2. Contact and offer your help to classroom teachers with regard to parent contact, student motivation, and mentoring.</li><li>3. Be available to discuss student concerns with faculty.</li><li>4. Attend faculty meetings/parent conferences/ department meetings to stay informed and to advocate for your students.</li></ol>   |
| Student concerns               | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Consider keeping a teacher researcher journal to document student concerns.</li><li>2. Share those concerns with teachers to build community.</li><li>3. Assume student information needs to be shared i.e., family issues, student issues regarding bullying or LGBT preferences.</li></ol>  |
| Meetings                       | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Professional Learning Communities will need dedicated time to meet using a common planning time.</li><li>2. Meetings should start at the beginning of the school year.</li><li>3. Meetings should occur at least once a month with optimal time frame occurring every two weeks. (note: once a week is not productive)</li><li>4. Audio-recorded meetings will help to organize information for the group.</li><li>5. Using a protocol to structure the meetings will ensure group focus and timeliness of meetings. (The protocol may need to be restructured if it does not meet the needs of the community).</li></ol>   |

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