

## Growing Together: Best Practices for Catholic Schools

**Practice Area:** Using Data to Inform Instructional Decisions

**Archdiocese:** Archdiocese of Hartford

**Assistant Superintendent:** Valeria Mara

### The Need:

The Archdiocese of Hartford determined that in order to meet the diversity of students' learning needs and learning styles, teachers needed to understand students' academic strengths and deficiencies. This aided in their ability to design instructional practices to maximize students' growth potential. Annually, the variety of assessments – standardized and teacher-developed – yield rich data about individual students as well as classroom and school-wide achievement. Teachers need to be able to break data down into meaningful pieces of information that can be used to guide instruction. The Catholic Schools Office, principals and teachers work together to create a [culture of professional learning](#) (1) in the schools of the Archdiocese of Hartford that endures.

### The Goal:

The goal is to effectively use student performance data to improve instructional decisions in the classroom. Teachers should be able to draw upon multiple sources of data about student learning and understand how best to use this information to improve instruction.

### The Process:

In order to create a common direction for improving instructional practice, the Assistant Superintendent for Academics worked with all of the principals to [create professional learning](#) (2) communities (PLCs) for the schools beginning during the 2007-2008 academic year. Using research about the effectiveness of professional learning communities, principals from schools in close geographic proximity, were organized into PLCs and were provided professional development activities that

developed a focus on using data to improve classroom instruction in their schools.

The principals met in their groups a minimum of three times per year. The PLCs were focused on analyzing the available standardized test data for language arts and mathematics used to assess student progress. They studied how the data were presently being used and how data could be used more effectively in conjunction with school goals and classroom [instructional goals](#). (3)

All of the schools use standardized tests that provide item-by-item analysis of the particular skill assessed. The teachers are able to see where individual students struggle or excel in each skill and adjust instruction accordingly. Classroom results are able to be compared with national data as well as with other Archdiocesan schools.

Professional development was provided for the principals so they would be able to interpret data and be able to work with their faculty as they were organized into PLCs at the school level. The individual principal's professional learning goals for the year are to include goals for the PLCs.

School-level PLCs were created for grade-spans and each PLC met once a week to develop a curriculum template to map out what skills would be emphasized across the curriculum. Once a month, at a full faculty meeting, a flow chart was produced to diagram the skills taught in each classroom. Then additional areas to focus on were determined for the next month and PLCs worked to integrate them into the content areas across the curriculum.

Over the years, the archdiocese has invested significant resources to create professional

development opportunities for principals and teachers so they might develop techniques to personalize learning and utilize digital platforms and software to improve classroom instruction and cross-curricular learning.

### **Best Practices in the area of using data to inform instructional decisions:**

1. Befriend data: establish a clear vision for schoolwide use of data and provide supports that foster a data driven culture within the school.
2. Use data as part of the ongoing cycle of instructional improvement for the entire school. If principals and other school administrators educate themselves about the effective use of data, they can help to build these capacities in their staffs.
3. Create time (scheduled regular early dismissal of students) so teachers may collaborate in weekly quality professional learning community activities to ensure delivery of effective instruction for students.
4. Collect student data from multiple sources (standardized tests, quizzes, writing samples, projects and use weekly PLC meetings to analyze, interpret the data and use findings to adjust instruction and plan lessons and motivate student performance.
5. Use data to communicate with other teachers across grade levels to identify gaps in student learning, both class-wide and for individual students, and design instructional practices to close those gaps.
6. Teach students to examine their own data and set measurable learning goals for themselves.
7. On the diocesan level, develop and maintain a diocesan-wide data system: set expectations for data collection and its use to drive instructional choices.

### **For More Information:**

Valerie Mara  
Assistant Superintendent for Academics  
Archdiocese of Hartford  
valerie.mara@aohct.org

### **For more resources and information on the topic of professional learning communities, please explore:**

**Learning Forward:** This a professional association committed to professional development of school educators. Their programs demonstrate how to plan, implement, and measure high-quality professional learning so teams can achieve success. <https://learningforward.org/standards-for-professional-learning>

**Richard DuFour: What Is a “Professional Learning Community”?** <http://franklinschools.org/cms/lib2/IN01001624/Centricity/Domain/101/DuFour%20Article%20on%20PLC.pdf>

**Shirley M. Hord: Professional Learning Communities: Educators Work Together Toward A Shared Purpose: Improved Student Learning** <http://www.ecap-videos.ca/ecap/resources/Hord2009.pdf>

**Professional Learning Communities at School: North Carolina Department of Public Instruction** This site provides an introduction to professional learning communities including research related to best practices of professional learning communities along with sample protocols for discussions. <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/profdev/resources/proflearn/>

**Best Practice for Professional Learning Communities** <http://www.educationworld.com/admin/best-practices-for-professional-learning-communities.shtml>

**Teachers Know Best: Teachers’ Views on Professional Development** <https://s3.amazonaws.com/edtech-production/reports/Gates-PDMarketResearch-Dec5.pdf>

**Teachers Know Best: Making Data Work For Teachers and Students** <https://s3.amazonaws.com/edtech-production/reports/Gates-TeachersKnowBest-MakingDataWork.pdf>

**Richard DuFour, Robert Eaker, Rebecca DuFour, Thomas Many: Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work** [http://pages.solution-tree.com/rs/solutiontree/images/lbd\\_freechapter.pdf](http://pages.solution-tree.com/rs/solutiontree/images/lbd_freechapter.pdf)

**Jon Saphier: Content Teams and Error Analysis--How School Leaders Create High-Functioning Teams that Use Data to Plan Re-teaching** <http://www.rbteach.com/sites/default/files/contentteamsanderroranalysis.pdf>