

SMART Showcase School

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A Different Approach to Professional Development

By **Lucas McConnell**

When a teacher receives a **SMART Board™ interactive whiteboard** for the first time, it's an exciting event, but it can also be overwhelming. Geoff Freymuth is the instructional technology specialist at **Jefferson Middle School**, a SMART Showcase School in Champaign, Illinois, and he knows that teachers are sometimes hesitant about working with their first SMART Board interactive whiteboard.

"When I tell teachers they're getting a SMART Board in their classroom, they're excited," Freymuth says. "But their first question is, 'Now what? This is great, and I've seen you do fancy things with it, but how do I actually pull that off in a lesson?'"

With that question in mind, administration at Jefferson spearheaded a professional development program geared toward meeting the needs of their teachers. In his role as instructional technology specialist, Freymuth plays a central part in executing the program and explains the philosophy behind it.

"Instead of regular staff meetings and typical professional development driven by training where you get one shot at something in a short period of time, we wanted to look at something different," Freymuth says. "So we had teachers write professional learning plans, where they were able to set goals for themselves and their departments on what they saw as their needs and what they needed to focus on to improve their teaching and help their students."



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Geoff Freymuth

Instructional Technology Specialist
Champaign, Illinois

Professional Learning Communities

What this translates into is a professional development program designed to fulfill the specific needs of each teacher. Jessica Pitcher teaches science and technology in Jefferson's synergistic science lab, and she says it's as simple as applying the same strategies that she uses every day as a teacher to her own learning.

"We spend a lot of time thinking about differentiation in our classroom. And this is basically the same thing for teachers," Pitcher says. "We do a lot of group work to make that happen and those groups are differentiated by similar interests or similar goals."

The groups Pitcher is talking about are called Professional Learning Communities (PLC), and they form the backbone of professional development at Jefferson. Each PLC includes teachers who have identified similar areas they wish to explore. And to make certain that teachers get the time they need to make working within a PLC effective, Freymuth says that the administration at Jefferson has made adjustments to ensure each PLC can meet twice a month.

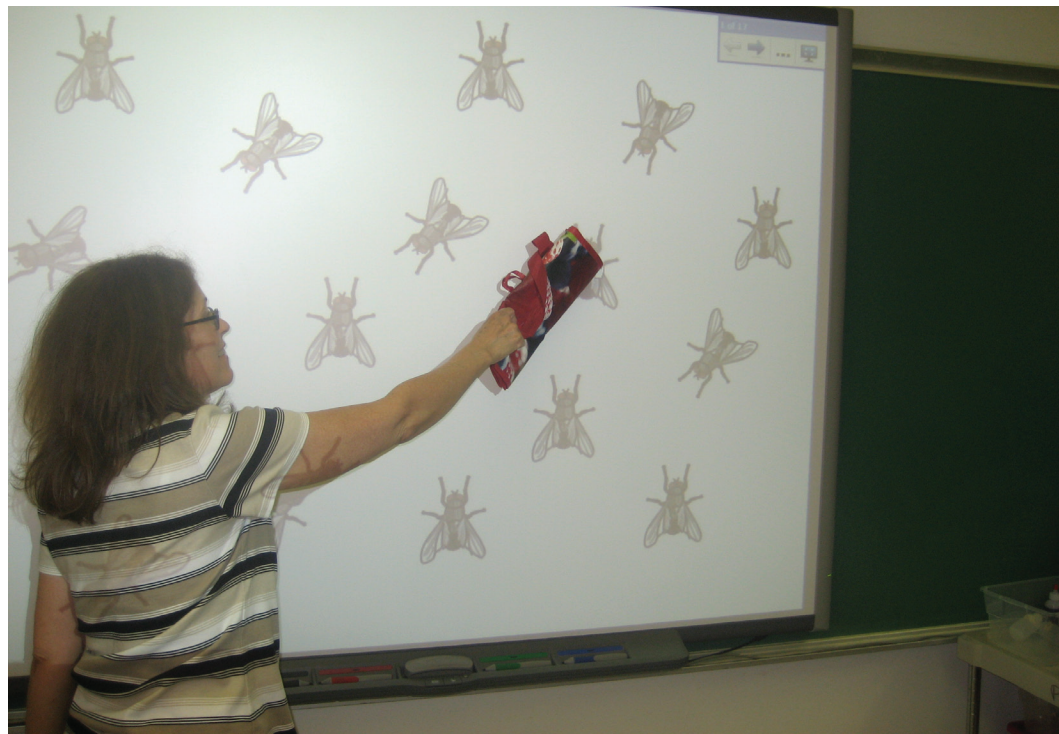
"We've had over 18 hours of PLC time this school year alone, so you're looking at continuous, sustained reinforcement that really gives teachers a chance to practice," Freymuth says. "We've allocated a lot of the details of running a school to e-mail and department meetings instead of regular staff meetings. So our PLC time has been reserved for the learning that the teachers need."

And the PLC meetings are a valuable resource for teachers to achieve their ultimate goal – meeting students' needs.

"It's really a systematic approach to improve student performance through the goal setting of each PLC. You start getting feedback loops and cycles among the teachers as they share lessons and try new things,"



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Freyimuth says. "And all of this goes back to the needs of the students and the goals that each PLC set to improve student performance."

The effect of the PLC in the classroom

Teachers at Jefferson are starting to see the results of the work they are putting into their PLC. Sixth-grade social studies and science teacher Donna Peyton says that working with her PLC has been motivational.

"Knowing that I'm going to be meeting my PLC consistently every two weeks forces me to stay on top of my technology and to keep trying it," Peyton says. "I want to make sure that what I'm showing is useful. And it's really accelerated the things that I try in my classroom – things that I don't think I'd try if I wasn't working with my PLC."

Seventh-grade science and social studies teacher Jackie Baxter says that she has seen increased focus in her students since she began incorporating SMART products into her teaching, and this is something that the PLC program has helped her achieve.

"At the end of the semester, we put together a PLC showcase, so each PLC would put together something that gave us a snapshot of what they were doing," Baxter says. "It gave me a lot of ideas, and even if they were content specific, I knew I could use the ideas in my classroom."

While the forums provided by each PLC have played a central role in ensuring the success of professional development at Jefferson, there is no doubt in Freyimuth's mind as to what the most critical element has been.

"We have an extraordinary group of professional teachers who are also leaders. And I don't think it would necessarily work if you didn't have a group of teachers as dedicated to teaching and getting results out of students. These teachers chose their objectives, did the research and then set about doing it." **EC**

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