

Plainwell Middle School

720 Brigham Street

Plainwell, MI 49080

Director of Curriculum: Bob Van Dis

In 2005, Plainwell Community Schools implemented districtwide curriculum restructuring with professional development focused on using the research-based instructional strategies outlined in Robert Marzano's Classroom Instruction that Works (2003). The district initiative emerged from a successful pilot that began at Plainwell High School in 2003 and has since spread to each of the district's elementary and middle schools.

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- ◆ Middle (6-8)
 - ◆ 97% White
 - ◆ 1% African American
 - ◆ 1% Hispanic
 - ◆ 24% free- and reduced-price lunch

Some of the instructional delivery techniques that were adopted as part of this professional development include the use of nonlinguistic representations of abstract concepts and the use of higher-order questions to elicit student explanations. Teachers find Marzano's strategies to be compelling, noting the evidence of a significant correlation between increased student achievement and the use of research-proven instructional techniques. This approach lays the groundwork for a shift in staff culture, moving away from the use of personal intuition to the use of empirical, quantitative data to inform decisions around teaching and learning.

In 2005, social studies teachers at Plainwell Middle School decided to adopt a new curriculum aligned with Marzano's strategies that was introduced by lead teacher Matt Moorman. Interactive slideshows are used as a way to actively engage students in new content learning, letting them participate in lectures by touching, interpreting, and acting out historical images and events projected onto a screen. The curriculum also supports vocabulary instruction with graphic organizers that connect definitions with visuals to help students understand and retain key terms. Some teachers, like Bonny Bowen, have modified the workbook graphic organizers to create their own "visual dictionaries."

The middle school teachers also advocated for improved technology to better implement the curriculum. It was critical for teachers to have large screens to incorporate the use of visuals in the classroom. Document cameras were purchased to help teachers easily project pictures, 3-D objects, and student work without having to prepare copies or transparencies ahead of time. For example, when Bowen discusses the different symbols on the presidential seal, she can place a dollar bill on the projector to share those images with the class.

Another popular approach in the new social studies curriculum is the use of experiential exercises to teach historical concepts in physical and emotional ways. Teachers use classroom situations that simulate experiences like the American colonists' growing discontent with "taxation without representation" through a game, and then debrief the activity by comparing elements of the classroom scenario with historical events.

Higher-order questions are also used as an instructional technique through the new curriculum. Response groups are a structure that teachers use to facilitate small group discussion on controversial topics in history. Through a series of probing questions that require critical thinking and the use of evidence, teachers elicit student explanations that require analysis and application of historical information. Finally, students match up their decisions and viewpoints with actual decisions made in history.

In addition to these strategies, social studies teachers at Plainwell Middle School intentionally build review into daily lessons and assessments. Each day begins with a warm-up activity that quizzes students on a previous lesson. Teachers also allow for multiple opportunities for students to recall and retain vocabulary and key concepts through games. When introducing a lesson, teachers also make sure to begin with a preview activity that they can refer back to when reviewing the material in later weeks.

Curriculum restructuring at the middle school is carefully implemented to ensure success, according to Director of Curriculum, Bob Van Dis. First, a less-is-more approach is taken, allowing ample time for teachers to learn and practice a single strategy before moving on to another one. Also, teacher training is conducted by lead teachers, including Matt Moorman at Plainwell Middle School, who model classroom techniques, lead guided discussions, and set periodic objectives for teams. Instead of a passive "sit-and-get" approach, teachers actively practice the strategies and report to their teams about their progress. Finally, administrators support the efforts by aligning observational classroom walk-through forms to match the professional development focus, keeping the strategies at the center of conversation about teaching.