Professionalism (PPS)

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Established by the Virginia Board of Education in 2008 and revised in 2011, the “Virginia Standards for the Professional Practice of Teachers” are meant to define the expectations of the teaching profession leading to higher accountability among educators. The Standards accomplish this goal by defining what teachers should know and do in their profession to best support student success. The criteria for meeting the sixth standard, Professionalism, is defined by the Virginia Board of Education as, “Teachers maintain a commitment to professional ethics, communicate effectively, and take responsibility for and participate in professional growth that results in enhanced student learning.” (2011, p5). When a teacher follows the standard of professionalism he/she lends credibility to the teaching profession as a whole.

A teacher in Virginia is required to complete specialized higher education in an approved teacher education program, demonstrate her/his professional knowledge through passing high-stakes tests, and have experience in the classroom through a student teaching experience. These requirements speak to the rigorous nature of teaching as well as the importance of being truly prepared to enter the classroom and foster student learning. Teaching is not simply a job, it is a profession; therefore a teacher should dignify the hard work that s/he does within that profession by demonstrating professionalism. Three of the most critical ways a teacher can demonstrate the standard of Professionalism are by: building positive and professional relationships with parents/guardians through frequent and effective communication concerning students’ progress, collaborating and communicating effectively within the school community to promote students’ well-being and success, and incorporating learning from professional growth opportunities into instructional practice.
The first way that a teacher demonstrates the standard of Professionalism is through building positive and professional relationships with parents/guardians through frequent and effective communication concerning students’ progress. Students succeed when when their parents or guardians are actively involved in their learning, and effective teacher communication facilitates that parent/guardian involvement. It is difficult for a parent to be involved if they are not informed. In a study published in *Education*, researchers found positive academic and behavioral effects for students related to parent/guardian involvement when teachers communicated with parent/guardians of the students (Shirvani, 2007). The experimental group had teachers send a contact sheet home to be signed by the parent/guardian each day with information about the student’s academic progress (in the form of his/her homework grade for the day), behavior, and engagement. Students in the experimental group showed better behavior, engagement, and academic success (in the form of higher homework grades) than the control group where the parent contact form was not used. (Shirvani, 2007) Just as effective communication with parents/guardians improves student success, the next demonstration of the standard of Professionalism, effective collaboration and communication in the school community, aids in achieving that same goal.

The second way a teacher demonstrates the standard of professionalism is through collaborating and communicating effectively within the school community to promote students’ well-being and success. In their article “Survivors or Friends”? A Framework for Assessing Effective Collaboration”, Wiggins and Damore state that research shows effective collaboration to be a factor which increases the ability of educators to meet the needs of a diverse student population. The article by Wiggins and Damore is primarily addressing the great benefit of
focused effective collaboration among general educators, special educators, and administrators to
students with special needs, but this concept can be expanded to all learners. Just as
communicating and collaborating can improve the ability of special and general education
teachers to meet the needs of special education students in the classroom, it can also serve to
improve the pedagogy of participating teachers and offer them the feeling of support which
research has suggested keeps teachers in the profession longer (Wiggins & Damore, 2006).

A tool used by many schools to support this collaboration and communication among
educators are Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). PLCs typically consist of teachers
who are on the same grade level, teach the same subject, or who work with the same students
(Battersby & Verdi, 2015). In the article “The Culture of Professional Learning Communities
and Connections to Improve Teacher Efficacy and Support Student Learning”, the authors say
that, “PLCs have been shown to be an effective strategy in improving student achievement and
increasing teacher quality.” (Battersby & Verdi, 2015, p24). Battersby and Verdi warn against
viewing PLCs as simply getting together. They state that there must be a firm directed goal for
improving student outcomes they describe as, “an ongoing process of structured inquiry and
action research” focused on maximizing student learning (Battersby & Verdi, 2015, p24). Both
the Battersby and Verdi article and the article by Wiggins and Damore advocate the effectiveness
of collaboration between educators within the school community as a valuable form of
professional development (2015), (2006). This leads to the third way that a teacher can
demonstrate the standard of professionalism, incorporating learning from professional growth
opportunities.
The third way a teacher can demonstrate the standard of Professionalism is through incorporating learning from professional growth opportunities into instructional practice. In the study, “An Investigation of the Impacts of Teacher-Driven Professional Development on Pedagogy and Student Learning” the authors cite professional development as a frequently used and ultimately needed tool for improving teacher quality (Colbert, Brown, Choi & Thomas, 2008). In “Collaborative Professional Development” authors Stegg and Lambson say research shows that effective professional development has five features in common, “(1) a focus on subject matter content, (2) active teacher learning, (3) coherence with knowledge, beliefs, and school reforms and policies, (4) duration of activity over an extended period of time, and (5) collective participation as an interactive community”(2015, p 473). Within the study conducted by Colbert and his colleagues a connection was found between teacher agency and collaboration in professional development, and anecdotal evidence of increased student interest, motivation, and success. Regarding this link between teacher driven professional development and student success the authors stated, “While this relationship may not be readily apparent in performance on standardized tests, qualitative data provided by these teachers lends support to the influence on student learning.”(Colbert, Brown, Choi & Thomas, 2008, p.148). A teacher is responsible for demonstrating the standard of professionalism through integrating their professional learning into instructional practice; however professional growth opportunities must be relevant and effectively taught in order to be useful for that teacher in her/ his classroom.

It is clear that the studies above and the articles discussed previously on PLCs mark collaboration as integral in ensuring that professional development is relevant to incorporate in a teacher’s instructional practice. Professional development which is offered as a collaborative
effort where teachers can reflect on, discuss, and problem solve their pedagogical needs mirrors the collaborative classrooms which support student learning. As Battersby and Verdi put it, the varying needs of teachers should be addressed, “just as teachers design classroom activities to meet the needs of their students at different levels of skills and knowledge” (2008, 25).

This paper has offered a discussion of three ways a teacher can demonstrate the standard of Professionalism. The three ways where: building positive and professional relationships with parents/guardians through frequent and effective communication concerning students’ progress, collaborating and communicating effectively within the school community to promote students’ well-being and success, and incorporating learning from professional growth opportunities into instructional practice. The overarching theme in all three of these ways of demonstrating professionalism is communication and collaboration. A teacher must be able to communicate well with parents, colleagues, administrators, and other education professionals in order to collaborate in improving: service to students, his/her own teaching practice, and the advancement of the teaching profession as a whole.

As a teacher I intend to ensure that I demonstrate professionalism through this essential communication and collaboration. First of all, I will use multiple avenues to contact and collaborate with parents to ensure their student’s success. A few examples of ways I could keep in contact with parents are through newsletters, phone calls, webpage updates, and in person meetings through conferences and office hours. Secondly, I will seek out a school which supports PLCs or similar collaborative efforts and be an engaged and active member of that school community. I will collaborate with colleagues and administrators in meetings, during planning time, at after school events, and through shared documents and/or webpages. Finally, I
will seek professional development/growth opportunities which address my areas of need as a teacher. I will look for mentors among my colleagues who are willing to discuss my attempts at incorporating what I learn from professional development into my instructional practice and brainstorm strategies for improvement with me.
References


