

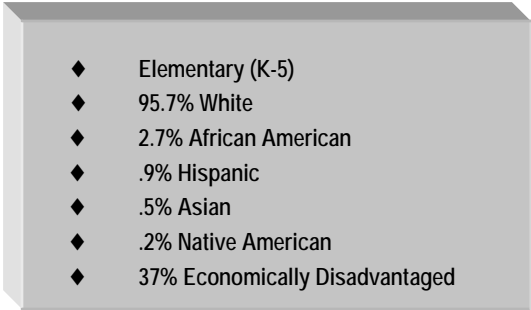
Starr Elementary School

601 School Drive

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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- ◆ Elementary (K-5)
 - ◆ 95.7% White
 - ◆ 2.7% African American
 - ◆ .9% Hispanic
 - ◆ .5% Asian
 - ◆ .2% Native American
 - ◆ 37% Economically Disadvantaged

Some of the instructional delivery techniques that were adopted as part of this professional development included the use of nonlinguistic representations of abstract concepts. Teachers found 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 laid 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.

At Starr Elementary, teachers decided to adopt a new social studies curriculum aligned with Marzano's strategies and the current middle school curriculum. The program embeds the use of nonlinguistic representations through a variety of activities, including vocabulary exercises with graphic organizers that connect definitions with visuals to help students understand and retain key terms. Some teachers, like Tasia Stamos, create additional graphic organizers for using visuals in vocabulary instruction that complement the existing workbook activities.

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 activities that simulate situations through a game and then debrief the experience by comparing elements of the classroom scenario with historical events. For example, Stamos reveals how the underdog American colonists defeat the powerhouse Great Britain through a carefully constructed game of Tug of War.

Science is another subject area where teachers make frequent use of concrete connections to teach abstract concepts to students. Stamos designed and teaches a 12-week unit on the hydrosphere, which she conducts for each of the four fifth-grade

classes. She uses visuals and metaphors to help her students understand the components of water molecules and how they act at various temperatures. In a lab, she has students discover the different densities of various liquids. And in a thermal layering lab, she uses colored water to show the different temperature layers within a lake system throughout the year, something that normally can't be seen. Stamos explains that activities like these are important for conveying topics like density or thermal layering because "they give them something to hold on to, an image or a concrete idea, to understand what's happening in a really complex process."

Curriculum restructuring at the elementary school is carefully implemented to ensure success, according to Director of Curriculum, Bob Van Dis. First, a less-is-more approach was adopted, 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 Tasia Stamos at Starr Elementary—who models classroom techniques, leads guided discussions, and sets 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.

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