WHEN educators think about professional development in schools they always worry about time. Where will it come from? How much time will there be? Will we have “enough” time? Will we use our time well?

Often, time for adult learning is viewed as a structural or administrative issue: How will we get time? When will it be? How much will we have? Who pays for it?

It’s true that time is a measurable, definable resource that teachers, principals, and staff developers think about and use in
concrete, systematic ways. But time is also much more. As Schein (1992) points out: “Time imposes a social order, and how things are handled in time conveys status and intention.

The pacing of events, the rhythms of life, the sequence in which things are done, and the duration of events all become subject to symbolic interpretation” (pp. 114-115).

How educators think about time, and how they use it, is woven into the cultures of their schools. School leaders must learn how to read a school’s culture, and how to focus staff development on the cultural issues that affect how people use their time. Thus they can spend their time building a culture that uses time well.

**CULTURES THAT NURTURE, CULTURES THAT WOUND**

Culture is the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that builds up over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges. This set of informal expectations and values shapes how people think, feel, and act in schools (Levine and Lezotte, 1990). Culture plays a major role in school restructuring (Newmann and Associates, 1996) and school improvement efforts (Fullan, 1998). Culture influences the actions and the spirit of school life. It shapes a school’s motivation, commitment, effort, and focus.

In some schools, the culture inspires educators to learn and grow, to take risks, and to work collegially. Teachers feel supported when they want to assume leadership roles, reflect on practice and do other work to improve their teaching. These nurturing school cultures are more likely to invest in professional development, to spend time learning new skills and knowledge, and to enthusiastically engage in their own learning.

Other schools, however, are mired in beliefs about time that inhibit adult learning and student achievement. Staff members see staff development, or any effort to improve teaching, as a “waste of time,” to be avoided if possible.

Negative attitudes and beliefs can spring from many sources: Perhaps staff development activities were poorly conceived in the past and didn’t address teacher needs. Or the school has struggled academically for a long time and staff members have given up, telling each other that “nobody could teach these kids.” Someone who feels their students can’t learn would see no point in investing time in improving teaching practice.

Some schools develop “toxic” cultures, which actively discourage efforts to improve teaching or student achievement. In these schools the spirit and focus is fractured and often hostile, the value of serving students is replaced by the goal of serving self, a sense of helplessness and despair predominates, and professional growth is not a prized activity (Deal and Peterson, 1998). Staff members resist...
What to listen for

These statements indicate positive and negative views of time. Which of these do you hear at your school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NEGATIVE:</th>
<th>POSITIVE:</th>
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<tr>
<td>“Staff development takes time that I don’t have.”</td>
<td>“We use a lot of time for our own learning, but it’s important.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“We’re doing too much already.”</td>
<td>“We can do a couple more sessions on this technique this semester.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I don’t want to waste my time in that session! It won’t help me at all.”</td>
<td>“Let’s try this out. I think it might help me a lot in the classroom.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I need to get this week’s plans done. I don’t have time to think about next year.”</td>
<td>“If we fit this workshop in, it will help us for next year.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“This didn’t work when they tried it in 19__, and it won’t work today.”</td>
<td>“It didn’t work the last time they tried it, but times have changed and we can learn from their mistakes.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You’re wasting your time. It won’t help these kids learn.”</td>
<td>“This is important to the school’s improvement efforts. Let’s put our time into it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’m already changing my curriculum/instruction/assessment/etc. I don’t want one more thing to do.”</td>
<td>“This work will support the new curriculum/instruction/assessment I want to try.”</td>
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FOR FURTHER READING


reform, publicly ridiculing those who want to try new things. A toxic culture can destroy motivation, dampen commitment, depress effort, and change the focus of the school. It can decrease learning, frustrate growth, stymie risk taking, and foster radical individualism rather than collegiality.

SHAPING SCHOOL CULTURE

To shape a more nurturing culture, a school’s principal, staff developers, and teacher leaders need to examine their school with an eye for time issues. Suggested steps include:

Read the school’s culture. Leaders need to first understand the deeper norms, values, and beliefs of the school. Compile a history: Information sources could include present and former staff members, other district personnel, yearbooks, newspaper clippings, parents, and community leaders. Seek out the informal networks that touch the school. Look at how the school’s values have developed over time. Examine the symbols and stories that permeate the culture. Listen to how people talk about time they spend in the school. Look for rituals of time use.

Assess views of time. Does the school’s culture include ideas about time that support adult learning? For example, do teachers want to spend time conferring with colleagues and improving their teaching? Do they feel that time spent on staff development is worthwhile? What common conceptions about time do staff members share? Are there specific attitudes about time that need to be changed before teaching can improve?

Reinforce the positive. Through symbolic actions and model behaviors, leaders need to support positive and energizing views of the time spent learning and growing. Some examples:

- Look for teachers or activities in the school that make good use of time and single them out for public praise.
- Make a point of being a model by using time to do important work: If the principal makes regular time for conversations with teachers about curriculum, for example, that sends a powerful message that curriculum development is important.
- Provide positive examples. Make contact with other schools that succeed academically despite similar challenges, so teachers can see for themselves that it can be done.
- Select staff members who share positive values of time, who will be assets to a nurturing school culture.

At the same time, the school must address any negative, pessimistic views of time in the culture. Be candid and forthright: Toxic cultures are so unpleasant that
Beliefs about time

No one wants to admit being in one. This reluctance can stall serious discussion of how negative values can be turned around.

REFERENCES


