BLENDER IS a kitchen appliance that blends different foods into one dish for the family meal. Likewise, Whole-Faculty Study Groups blend different staff development approaches into classroom experiences for students.

In schools that use Whole-Faculty Study Groups, every certificated individual becomes a member of a site-based study group that meets weekly or, at the least, every other week. When these individuals come together and focus on student learning, the range of knowledge, resources, and experience they bring to the process are blended together for a more powerful impact on all of their students.

A FACULTY DECISION MAKING MODEL

The most distinguishing characteristic of Whole-Faculty Study Groups is how the faculty determines what the groups will study. Without appropriate content, the process is empty.

Once a faculty has decided to use study groups, all faculty members will be expected to participate in a study group. Next, the faculty must decide who will lead the groups by determining how groups will be organized and what groups will do. The leader(s) may come from within the school or from outside, such as consultants. This individual or group will collect and organize data for the faculty to use in making the “how and what” decisions.

When the faculty works together during this initial stage of decision-making, teachers begin to feel part of the effort and, as a result, feel less coerced when the groups actually begin working. Every faculty member should have voice in how the groups are organized and what the groups will do.

METHOD

STEP 1: Analyze a wide range of data and indicators describing the status of student learning and the condition of the learning environment.

If the school has a school improvement plan that was developed with faculty involvement, this may have been done already. If not, this step begins the process of determining how study groups will be organized and what they will do.

Possible sources for data might include:

- Examples of student work;
- Standardized test results;
- Performance of students on the district’s content standards;
- Discipline referrals and suspensions (how many and why);
- Community perceptions of the effectiveness of the school or district;
- Responses to questionnaires completed by parents, teachers, and students;
- Promotion and retention rates by grade level;
Samples of student and teacher portfolios;
Attendance and dropout rates;
Reports from accrediting agencies;
Personnel resignations and transfers (how many and why);
Employment rates of the graduates; and
The status of various instructional initiatives.

The last item on the list deserves special attention: The status of existing initiatives will give a strong direction to what study groups will do.

When collecting information for the faculty to review, use at least three consecutive years of data, to ensure a more accurate picture.

**STEP 2: Using the data, generate a list of student needs.**

Confine this process to identifying student needs that are addressed by how teachers teach and what teachers teach, and needs that are directly aligned with professional development of the teachers. Other student needs, such as regular school attendance, are addressed through other channels, such as committees.

For example, you may decide that your students need to (numbers do not indicate priorities):
1. Listen actively, critically, and effectively.
2. Write effectively for a variety of purposes.
3. Speak with clarity and confidence.
4. Use various types of technology.
5. Collect, organize, and review data effectively.
6. Master and accurately apply mathematical concepts.
7. Increase their reading skills.
8. Interpret and appropriately apply information from maps, charts, and graphs.
9. Employ conflict management skills.
10. Understand and appreciate different cultures.

**STEP 3: Categorize student needs and prioritize the categories or clusters.**

When student needs are categorized, several may cluster around broad areas or categories, such as mathematics, language development, behavior/discipline/management of the learning environment, and technology. After the needs are categorized, give each category a name and then set priorities for the categories.

For example, using the numbered list of student needs from Step 2, categories and priorities might look like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Needs</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Priority</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1, 9, 10</td>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7</td>
<td>Language development</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4, 5, 7, 8</td>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4, 5</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5, 6, 8</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**STEP 4: Organize study groups around the prioritized student needs.**

Now the faculty must decide how to organize the study groups. First, decide whether all of the study groups at a school will focus on one category of student need (in this example, language development, which was given first priority), or if the study groups should focus on different categories of student needs (such as language development, behavior, and technology). Once the faculty reaches consensus on this choice, faculty members can organize themselves into groups that examine specific aspects of the chosen need(s). Teachers should...
Steps 1 – 4 usually take about 10 hours to complete. If a school begins the process at the start of a new school year, time to accomplish Steps 1 – 4 should be scheduled for a pre-planning day, or part of a day, and continued during other times when the faculty comes together. This means study groups may not actually begin meeting until October. How long it takes to do the “front end” work will depend on where each faculty is in its understanding of schoolwide instructional needs.

As groups form, limit them to no more than six members. If eight teachers want to pursue technology, for example, they should form two study groups (Murphy, 1999).

Each study group, regardless of its focus, should return to the data that identified the student need. This gives the group a starting point and the direction for establishing what the group should do to address the student need. The district’s standards in each content area will keep the group focused on the desired student behaviors.

**STEP 5: Create a study group action plan.**

Each study group develops its own action plan. All plans should be displayed in a public place in the school. Each action plan should be kept up-to-date, and revised if the group takes unexpected twists and turns. If a group feels at any point that its plan doesn’t cover what needs to be done, the original plan should be “trashed” and a new one developed.

The study group action plan should include the following five components:
1. The general category of student need (such as technology);
2. Specific student needs within that category (such as using software applications to facilitate learning across all curriculum areas, and using approved Web sites to supplement printed reference materials);
3. What teachers will do when the study group meets to address the student needs (such as determining what software is available and evaluating it, practicing using the materials and equipment, and/or looking at student work produced on computers);
4. The intended results of the study group’s work, including what evidence will indicate that student needs have or have not been met; and
5. The study group’s curriculum of study and resources it will use.

**STEP 6: Implement the study group action plan.**

Each study group implements its action plan. The group investigates a new strategy or set of materials. The members use the strategy or materials in their classrooms and then share the results. They adjust the strategies and materials based on what they learn from each other. The members plan lessons together and actually teach lessons within the group to get feedback. Group members design materials together and share what has been developed in the past. They visit each other’s classrooms. They observe how students respond to the strategies and materials. They monitor the effects of the teaching strategies and materials on students by collecting information about student performance and participation.

The study group action plan is revisited every four to six weeks to see if it should be amended.

**STEP 7: Evaluate the impact of the study group effort on student performance.**

The results of any change should be tracked over a period of time to see what is actually happening and what adjustments are required. Three key questions are:
1. What evidence is there that a sense of community is deeper among the staff?
2. What evidence is there that teaching practices have changed?
3. What evidence is there that student achievement is improving?

The most important question to ask about whole faculty study groups is: Do they increase student achievement? The answer is not a simple “yes.” Just having the faculty organized into study groups that meet weekly will not increase student achievement. It is what teachers do when the study groups meet that will impact student performance.

**RESOURCES**


