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## Meeting Expectations

*Turn staff gatherings into learning opportunities*

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

“When you look out over a sea of tired faces, you know something’s not quite right,” said Greig Christian, a principal in Alberta, Canada.

Christian undoubtedly speaks for hundreds of principals who’ve experienced similar feelings as they stood before a weary staff at the end of a long school day. Increasingly, principals are moving away from traditional staff meetings and shaping their student-free staff time into professional learning opportunities. Districts are supporting those efforts by arranging early release days and by allowing schools more flexibility in determining their schedules.

Although teachers are often initially resistant or, at least, apprehensive about such changes, principals say teachers warm to the idea after just a few weeks of experiencing the difference. “Our teachers love this. They have a great time with each other and they are learning,” said Linda Ballow, a principal in the Adams Twelve Five Star District in suburban Denver.

### COMMUNICATION KEY

One of the first steps in transforming staff meeting time is figuring out how to ensure that teachers continue to receive information that traditionally has been shared during those meetings.

The form of the communication depends on the culture of the building. Some principals designate a central bulletin board for required information. Middle and high schools often disseminate information through department chairs.

Ballow, principal of North Star Elementary School in Thornton, Colo., works in a school where the staff is accustomed to checking e-mail several times a day. So she distributes a weekly e-mail newsletter to her staff. Teachers know they are expected to read the newsletter online. “They understand that if they don’t want meetings or longer meetings, they have to read their e-mail,” Ballow said.

Christian does a similar newsletter but prints copies and places them in every teachers’ mailbox because his staff is not quite as reliant on e-mail yet. “That way, someone can read a hard copy while they’re walking down the hall or at home, if they want,” he said.

In a similar way, Marilyn Jerde, principal of Arapahoe Ridge Elementary School in Westminster, Colo., begins each week with a Monday message sent to teachers via e-mail. On Friday afternoons, she distributes



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# Turn staff gatherings into learning opportunities

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a calendar of upcoming events to ensure that teachers know what lies ahead.

Jerde's school also has other structures that have replaced the traditional staff meeting and assist with ensuring good communication. (These structures were put in place by Jerde's predecessor, Carol Kiernan.) Arapahoe Ridge has a coordinating council composed of teachers who deal with various issues that might previously have been discussed in staff meetings. About half of the 25 teachers in the school have volunteered to serve on the council. The coordinating council deals with only one or two issues during a meeting and meets every other week. For example, a recent coordinating council meeting addressed plans for the school's literacy night. Once the issue had been discussed, Jerde shared the information with other teachers through her Monday message, although with so many teachers involved in reaching the decision, the news spreads quickly by word of mouth, she said.

"We don't really have to hash out every issue with all 25 teachers but it is important that teachers decide them. This way, we don't burden everybody with this discussion. We schedule the meeting for 30 minutes. We begin on time and we end on time," she said.

## ARRANGING TIME

As principal at Grand Centre Elementary School in Cold Lake, Alberta, Greig Christian initially introduced a learning segment into his weekly staff meetings. "That wasn't always effective. It was staff development but it was always at my direction and that wasn't really the idea of what I wanted," said Christian, who is now a principal in the Northern Lights School Division in Bonnyville, Alberta.

So Christian rearranged the school schedule so that a different group of grade-level teachers could meet with each other each morning from 8:30 a.m. to 9:10 a.m. That meant that grade-level teams were able to meet for 40 minutes each week. Support staff and administrators would re-

lieve teachers during that time.

Using the school and district goals as its guide, each grade-level team sets its own agenda for what it will study

"These professional learning communities took care of what we used to do in a curriculum committee so we eliminated that committee," he said.

Regular staff meetings continued but shifted their focus. For example, a climate committee that studied student and staff issues might use one staff meeting to discuss what it was learning. During another week, staff meeting time might be converted to time for student support teams to meet. Those teams focus on the specific needs of a single student and help teachers identify new strategies for working with that child.

## RELEASED TIME

In the Adams Twelve Five Star District in suburban Denver, time that was once devoted to staff meetings has now shifted to time for professional learning. Every school in the district has an early release day once a week to enable teachers to meet with each other for about two hours.

At Arapahoe Ridge, Jerde asks the staff to allow her to have 30 minutes every other week if something comes up that requires a more traditional staff meeting. But, if she needs to use that time, it follows the planned learning for the afternoon. "Our teachers value their learning time so much that they don't want to muddy the waters with other stuff. They want to get into their professional development," she said.

Each Wednesday afternoon, the Arapahoe Ridge staff begins in the school media center with 10 to 15 minutes of celebration. "We touch base and we talk about what's going well in the building. And we always have food because that adds to the celebration," Jerde said.

The school has set up a four-week rotation with each week taking a different form.

Teachers use the first week in a more traditional way, typically listening to an ex-

pert who shares new content in an area of concern for them. For example, one week might focus on how to motivate children to read. Another week might focus on the needs of gifted and talented learners.

During the second week, teachers meet in grade-level teams where they focus on how they can take what they learned in the preceding week and apply it to their classes. They plan lessons and assessments together.

During the third week, teachers meet in study teams of three to four people each. The study teams organize themselves according to topics of interest and read to learn more about best practice in an area of concern to them. For example, one study team might focus on reading comprehension for advanced learners while another might focus on managing reading in flexible groupings.

"We provide the books for them but they set the goals for themselves," Jerde said. "They love doing this. When they get together, it's very rich professional talk."

Before departing on study team day, the entire staff reassembles in the media center to share what they've been learning.

Finally, during the fourth week, teachers meet in vertical teams, each headed by a volunteer teacher leader. Everyone brings an example of student work to these meetings and the discussion focuses on what teachers need to do to improve what students are learning.

"What makes this work so well is that every one is participating. Once they get into this, it makes such a difference in their teaching," Jerde said.

At Ballow's school, Thoughtful Thursdays run in roughly the same way. They have been "a dream come true for me," said the principal.

A leadership team with representatives from every grade and every group of resource people plans each Thursday's meeting. "This is self-directed. Teachers are making all the decisions. I'm sitting back and being a part of the conversations instead of facilitating. It's wonderful," Ballow said.

# Alternatives to Staff Meetings

## NOTABLE QUOTE

If you have to identify, in one word, the reason why the human race has not achieved, and never will achieve, its full potential, that word would be: meetings.

— Dave Barry

### Departmental/grade-level meetings

**Advantage:** Extends opportunities for leadership.

**Disadvantage:** Another meeting gets labeled as being “unproductive.” Not all teachers hear the same message in the same way.

### Round-robin memos\*

**Advantage:** Easy to do.

**Disadvantage:** May take a long time for the information to reach everyone who needs to see it. Some individuals may not take responsibility for moving the memo along to the next person on the list.

\* Write a memo with the information that needs to be shared. At the top, list the names of everyone who needs to see it. Each person on the list passes the memo on to the next person on the list. Make sure your name is last so the memo comes back to you.

### Electronic communication

**Advantage:** Easy way to quickly share a brief amount of information with a variety of people.

**Disadvantage:** Some may not take the message as seriously. Individuals overloaded with e-mail may overlook.

### Newsletters/weekly bulletins

**Advantage:** Gets information out to a large audience. Presentation of information allows principal to emphasize the importance of various issues.

**Disadvantage:** The time involved in producing newsletter will delay the delivery of the message.

### Brown bag lunches

**Advantage:** Voluntary.

**Disadvantage:** Some may object to giving up their lunch time in favor of something that feels like work.

### Bulletin board messages in high traffic areas

**Advantage:** Easy to do. Almost anyone can contribute. Feels less bureaucratic.

**Disadvantage:** Difficult to determine if information has been seen by all who need it. Not appropriate way to share all information.

### Informal conversation/hall talk

**Advantage:** Happens more naturally. Requires no planning.

**Disadvantage:** Some individuals could be overlooked. Message may not be taken as seriously.

### One-to-one conversations

**Advantage:** Heightens the listener’s sense of importance.

**Disadvantage:** Time consuming. Message may not be consistent from conversation to conversation.

### Copies of minutes/letters/reports

**Advantage:** Easy — just copy and distribute with a note.

**Disadvantage:** If done too often, such mailings could develop a reputation as junk mail and go directly into the circular file.

### Telephone calls

**Advantage:** Good way to gauge the reaction as individuals hear the information you have to share.

**Disadvantage:** Time consuming. Repetitive if you must give the same information to a number of people.

### Executive summaries

**Advantage:** Time saver for recipient.

**Disadvantage:** Difficult to determine who’s read it and how they’ve reacted. Takes more time to summarize effectively than to distribute minutes or copy articles.

# Jigsaw Reading

## NOTABLE QUOTE

If you do not have time to read, you will not have time to lead.

— Phil Schlechty

**COMMENTS TO THE FACILITATOR:** A jigsaw provides a good way for staff members to learn new content and also provides an opportunity for staff members to teach each other what they have learned.

**TIME:** One hour.

**SUPPLIES:** Several articles or selections from books which would be helpful in a school improvement effort.

**PREPARATION:** Make sufficient copies of the articles for each participant.

**NOTE:** Although individuals will only be reading one article, the principal should provide copies of each article for all staff members. Encourage them to collect the material in a folder or notebook for future review.

## Directions

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1. Provide three to five articles or longer articles that have been broken down into three to five sections.
2. Divide the school staff into the same number of small groups, trying to have three to five persons in each group.
3. Have each member of the small groups silently read a different topic.  
Time: 10 minutes.
4. Create new small groups from the individuals who have read the same material. Allow them time to discuss what they have read. Time: 20 minutes.
5. Recreate the original small groups. Have each person teach the rest of the group about his or her reading. Time: 30 minutes.
6. Conclude with the question: What are the implications of this for our school?

# Mail Call

## NOTABLE QUOTE

Standing with the group rather than above it. Learning with colleagues rather than standing to the side to observe and judge. Empowering others through words and actions that increase their capacity and belief in themselves. These are the qualities of leadership that cause “ordinary” teachers and administrators to do the impossible, to create schools in which all students and staff members thrive because no matter what their role, they are skillful, empowered, and successful every day.

— Dennis Sparks

**COMMENTS TO THE FACILITATOR:** This activity encourages staff members to recognize the knowledge and wisdom of their colleagues.

**TIME:** One hour.

**SUPPLIES:** Large mailing envelopes, stack of blank index cards, pens of the same color.

## Directions

1. At the beginning of a staff meeting, give each teacher one of the large mailing envelopes, a stack of blank index cards, and a pen.
2. On the outside of the envelope, ask each teacher to describe a problem he or she is facing in class. Teachers should not sign the envelopes.
3. The principal should collect the envelopes and randomly distribute them among the staff, ensuring that no teacher receives his or her own envelope.
4. Each teacher should read the problem on each envelope. As they consider the problem, they should write their ideas about solving the problem on one of the blank index cards. One idea per card. Each completed card should be placed inside the envelope. Teachers should not sign the cards.
5. As one teacher completes his or her response, he or she passes the envelope to the next teacher. This continues until every teacher has had an opportunity to respond to every problem.
6. At the end of the meeting, each teacher should retrieve his or her own envelope.

*Source: Pam Robbins, independent consultant.*

# Examining Student Work

## NOTABLE QUOTE

When schools talk about being data-driven, people think of test scores, graduation rates, absenteeism rates. I don't know that those numbers are really very meaningful. Student work is a powerful example of student data. It's much more meaningful to go to real student work — a math portfolio, a sculpture, a videotape, a piece of writing — than to look at numbers about that work.

— Lois Easton

**BACKGROUND:** The Tuning Protocol was developed by the Coalition of Essential Schools to provide teachers with feedback on authentic assessments (exhibitions, portfolios, etc.). A teacher or a team of teachers presents samples of student work and the context for the work. The presenter then offers a focusing question. After reviewing the work, participants offer feedback.

**FACILITATION:** Can be facilitated by someone inside or outside the group.

**TIME:** One hour.

## Directions

### PRESENTATION.

*Time: 15 minutes*

- Presenter shares the student work and sets the context by describing the teaching/learning situation. Presenter poses one or two key questions to be answered.
- As the presenter speaks, participants are quiet, taking notes.

### CLARIFYING QUESTIONS.

*Time: 5 minutes.*

- Participants ask non-evaluative questions about the presentation, such as “What happened before X? What did you do next?”

### INDIVIDUAL WRITING.

*Time: 5 minutes.*

- Participants write individually about the presentation.

### PARTICIPANT DISCUSSION.

*Time: 15 minutes.*

- Presenter turns to one side and listens silently during this time.
- Participants discuss among themselves, exploring issues raised during the presentation, striving to understand the situation, and raising possible answers to the questions.

### PRESENTER REFLECTION.

*Time: 15 minutes*

- Presenter talks about the participants' discussion.
- Participants are silent, taking notes as the presenter speaks.

### DEBRIEFING.

*Time: 10 minutes*

- Presenter and participants discuss both the process and the content of the protocol.

**Source:** Lois Easton, professional development director, Eagle Rock School and Professional Development Center, Estes Park, Colo., (970) 586-7109, e-mail: leaston@psd.k12.co.us.

# Resources for staff learning

“Building Professional Community in Schools,” by Sharon Kruse, Karen Seashore Louis, and Anthony Bryk, *Issues in Restructuring Schools, Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools*, Issue No. 6, Spring 1994. Reviews critical elements of a healthy school culture. A copy of the report is available online at [www.wcer.wisc.edu/archives/completed/cors/Issues\\_in\\_Restructuring\\_Schools/ISSUES\\_NO\\_6\\_SPRING\\_1994.pdf](http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/archives/completed/cors/Issues_in_Restructuring_Schools/ISSUES_NO_6_SPRING_1994.pdf).

**Examining student work.** The Annenberg Institute maintains a web site that covers principles, preparation, collection, and examination and provides extensive resources from many school reform and teaching organizations. One of the pages in that site also includes facilitation tips for examining student work. [www.lasw.org](http://www.lasw.org).

**Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement** by Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker. (Bloomington, Ind.: National Education Service, 1998). Brings together the research and practical examples of how professional learning communities can lead to improved student learning. Price: \$24.95. To order, phone (800) 733-6786 or fax (812) 336-7790.

## From the NSDC library

Past issues of NSDC publications have focused on a number of topics that would benefit a school interested in using its staff meeting time more productively. This is just a sampling of resources that can be found on the NSDC web site, [www.nsd.org/library.htm](http://www.nsd.org/library.htm), or ordered through the NSDC Online Bookstore.

- Action research was the focus of the Feb./March 2000 issue of *Tools for Schools*.

- Collecting data was the focus of the Oct./Nov. 2000 *Tools for Schools* and the Winter 2000 issue of the *Journal of Staff Development*.

- **Improving Schools from Within** by Roland S. Barth. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1990.) Argues that collegiality, communication, and risk taking among adults in a school can foster an atmosphere for learning and leadership for all. To order, phone (800) 956-7739, fax (800) 569-0443, or online at [www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com).

- **Principal's Companion: Strategies and Hints to Make the Job Easier**, by Pam Robbins and Harvey Alvy (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 1995). Offers tried-and-true strategies with the most relevant leadership research and theory. Includes chapter on staff meetings. Price: \$32.95. To order, call (805) 499-9734, web: [www.corwinpress.com](http://www.corwinpress.com).

- **Whole-Faculty Study Groups: A Powerful Way to Change Schools and Enhance Learning**, by Carlene U. Murphy and Dale W. Lick. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 1998). Offers practical guidance to start, lead, and maintain faculty study groups. NSDC stock # B64. Price: \$37, non-members; \$29.60, members. To order, phone (513) 523-6029 or visit NSDC's Online Bookstore at [www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm](http://www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm).

- Examining student work was the focus of the Feb./March 2001 issue of *Tools for Schools* and the May 2001 issue of *Results*.

- Learning teams was the focus of the Aug./Sept. 2001 issue of *Tools for Schools*.

- Powerful strategies for professional learning was the focus of the Summer 1998 issue of the *Journal of Staff Development*.

- Using staff meetings more effectively for professional learning was the topic of the Oct./Nov. 1999 issue of *Tools for Schools*.

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# Ask Dr. Developer



**Dr. Developer has all the answers to questions that staff developers ask.**

**(At least he thinks he does!)**

## Use time to learn together

**Q** *I've read many articles in NSDC publications about the value of having teachers learn together. But I frankly don't know where to start. The only time I have with all of my teachers is our twice-a-month staff meetings. How could I use that time as learning time for teachers?*

**A** Principals who have moved in this direction say the best way to begin is by identifying a portion of the staff meeting as learning time. Initially, that may mean setting aside just 15 minutes of each staff meeting until you feel comfortable adding more time. Another option would be to designate one meeting each month for learning while holding the other meeting for more routine business.

Here are just a few ideas to help you get started:

- Assemble student testing data and allow teachers time to examine that information. Encourage teachers to draw conclusions about what they see in the data and to ask questions. What more would they like to learn as a result of looking at this information? If you need grids that would help you present this information,

visit the NSDC web site and look at various articles concerning data-based decision making.

- Start a book study in your school. Ask teachers which professional books they would enjoy and benefit from studying together. If they're reluctant to do that, identify a book that you've found beneficial yourself. Buy enough copies so every teacher has his or her own copy. Another possibility is to take an issue of a professional magazine, such as the *Journal of Staff Development*, and have teachers devote a month to reading and reflecting upon the articles in that magazine. When they return to the meeting a month later, you or someone you designate should be prepared to facilitate a discussion about the book or magazine.

- Ask teachers who have attended workshops during the school year to spend no more than 10 minutes describing what they learned. Once you develop that as an expectation in your building, teachers will be prepared to make that presentation each year.

- If a large number of teachers attend a single conference or workshop, ask them to teach the rest of the staff about what they learned.

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