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## Think outside the clock

*Create time for professional learning*

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

**T**eachers at Addison Elementary School in Marietta, Ga., work in a school district that provides substantial opportunities for staff development. But Addison teachers wanted more: They wanted to work together in study groups every week, an activity not covered by the district staff development plan. Because they were saddled with the traditional school schedule, the study groups would have to meet after school unless teachers had another plan.

Principal Carolyn Jurick and the Addison staff approached the school's PTA about supporting cultural arts activities that would involve students but not teachers for one hour every other week. That worked fine for awhile but parents soon tired of the substantial commitment required in that effort and Jurick moved on to Plan B.

In Plan B, Jurick hired subs to cover classrooms for an entire day every other week. The subs worked all day but rotated from classroom to classroom. A study group of six to eight teachers could meet for one hour while subs covered their classrooms.

"At first, teachers thought that was a god-

send. But that wore thin after awhile. Even though they were out of their classrooms, they still had to plan for the subs, and they still had to worry about covering lunch," Jurick said.

On to Plan C. In Plan C, Jurick and her staff concocted a plan to have students begin school 10 minutes earlier than other elementary schools and end 10 minutes later — in exchange for releasing students from school at 1:30 p.m. every Wednesday. Teachers would continue to work until at least 3 p.m. and use that time to meet in their study groups.

Four years later, this plan is still working.

"It costs us nothing, and we love it. But we couldn't have done this if we hadn't been able to show that the other ways wouldn't work," Jurick said.

The Addison staff's experience in trying to find time for professional learning offers several significant lessons about the conundrum facing virtually all schools that struggle with this issue:

- Teachers must be flexible and even creative in how they think about their schedules.
- Teachers must be willing to make trade-offs

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# Think outside the clock

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in order to gain what they really want.

- Teachers must be clear about the connection between their own learning and improvements in student learning.

- Teachers must come prepared with Plan B in case Plan A doesn't work.

Although educators are increasingly realizing the value of having teachers work together every day and every week, schools are still burdened with outdated ideas about teachers' and principals' work day and work year. And shaking up that status quo impacts not only teachers but families that have come to expect schools to operate at certain times and in certain ways.

NSDC is clear in its beliefs about this: 25% of an educator's work time should be devoted to professional learning and collaboration with colleagues. But a survey of members in 2000 revealed that no districts had yet reached that level of commitment. Excluding daily planning time, 81% of the respondents to that survey said less than 5% of a teacher's work week was devoted to professional learning.

Even preparation time for teachers is limited, according to Stanford University professor Linda Darling-Hammond. She estimates that most U.S. elementary teachers have three or fewer hours for preparation each week (only 8.3 minutes for every hour in the classroom) and that secondary teachers generally have five prep periods per week (13 minutes per hour of classroom instruction (Darling-Hammond, *JSD Spring 1999*, p. 33).

Acknowledging the difficulty of the task, NSDC Executive Director Dennis

Sparks recommends that schools begin by identifying three to four hours a week — or about 10% of a teacher's work time — for learning and working with peers on improving instruction. "Then schools can begin to experiment with ways to extend that time over the next two or three years to 25% of teachers' work time," he said.

James Madison University professor Michael Rettig, who consults with numerous school districts on scheduling issues, said no district has ever invited him in specifically to find more time for staff development. Typically, districts contact him because they want to find larger blocks of instructional time. If that creates opportunities for staff development, it's a great side benefit, but not the primary focus, he said.

But Rettig said the challenge of finding more time for professional learning is the same as finding larger blocks of instructional time. "The problem is that they're not willing to trade away something in order to get that," Rettig said.

In elementary schools, for example, he said finding common planning time for all teachers in a grade-level is relatively simple. "I can easily create a schedule that would achieve that. But it would mean that teachers might have to lose their individual planning periods on certain days. That's a trade-off that many teachers don't want to make," he said.

When schools do find a schedule they believe will work for them, Rettig urges them to pilot the new plan for a year and, if possible to pilot several different ideas in the same district before committing.

Mikki Bendotti, who has worked with several Arizona schools to find more professional learning time, cautions that freeing teachers to work together is insufficient. "Once the time is there, teachers need guidance and preparation for how to use it. If it just becomes time for them to sit by themselves and grade papers, then an opportunity for learning has been lost," said Bendotti, executive director of the Arizona Teacher Advancement Program, which is funded by the Milken Foundation.

Teachers need preparation in how to run a meeting, how to set norms for those meetings, how to lead decision making and more. In other words, teachers need staff development in order to prepare for staff development. "That's especially the case when teachers have only experienced a sit-and-get model of staff development," she said.

Bendotti has also learned that it's better to make sacrifices to carve out larger chunks of time that occur less frequently than to have short but more frequent meetings. For example, arranging to have teachers meet for 30 minutes every day is probably less effective than meeting for 45 minutes three times a week.

Like many districts, the Hoover City Schools in suburban Birmingham, Ala., is still searching for the answer to its time puzzle. "We're still struggling to find that perfect model, that perfect solution. But it's not there. You have to think creatively. How do you develop your teachers and safeguard the instructional time for your children? That's the rub," said Deborah Camp, curriculum instruction technology specialist for has been part of discussions where teachers and administrators have been grappling with this issue.

"Here's my dream: Have all teachers work on a 12-month calendar, compensate teachers for that time, and build staff development days right into their work year. If we lengthened the school day for teachers and increased the number of days that teachers work, your time issue would disappear. Doing it any other way, it's always going to be a struggle," Camp said.

*"Once the time is there, teachers need guidance and preparation for how to use it. If it just becomes time for them to sit by themselves and grade papers, then an opportunity for learning has been lost," says Mikki Bendotti, executive director of the Arizona Teacher Advancement Program.*

# How To Find Time

*Schools and districts that have carved out more time for professional learning have typically relied on one of the following strategies. Most of these strategies were initially identified in "The time dilemma in school restructuring," by Gary Watts and Shari Castle, **Phi Delta Kappan** 75 (1), December 1993.*

## Bank time

- Lengthen the regular school day. "Save" the extra minutes to create larger blocks of time when teachers can plan or learn together.
- Create regularly scheduled early dismissal/late start days.
- Shave minutes off the lunch period and "save" that time for teacher learning time.

## Buy time

- Hire more teachers, clerks, and support staff to create smaller classes and/or expand or add planning or learning times for teachers.
- Hire substitute teachers to fill-in for regular classroom teachers to enable those teachers to plan or learn together.
- Add an extra teaching position in the school for a rotating substitute teacher who would regularly fill in for teachers in order to free them for planning or learning time.
- Create a substitute bank of "staff development substitute teachers" which regular classroom teachers can tap in order to participate in various forms of professional learning.

## Common time

- Use common planning time to enable teachers working with the same students, the same grade level, or the same subject to share information, collaborate on projects, or learn more about their shared interest.
- Organize "specials" into blocks of time to create common time for teachers with similar interests.
- Link planning periods to other non-instructional times, such as lunch periods, giving teachers the option to use their personal time for shared learning time.

## Free teachers from instructional time

- Enlist administrators to teach classes.
- Authorize teaching assistants and/or college interns to teach classes at regular intervals, always under the direction of a teacher.
- Team teachers so one teaches while the other plans or learns independently.
- Plan day-long, off-site field experiences for students in order to create a large block of time when teachers can learn.

## Add professional days to the school year

- Create multi-day summer learning institutes for teachers in order to ensure that they receive the necessary depth in areas of strategic importance for the district.
- Create a mid-year break for students and use those days for teacher learning.

## Use existing time more effectively

- Provide professional learning time during staff meetings. (For ideas on better ways to use staff meetings, see the Oct./Nov. 1999 *Tools for Schools*.)
- Spread time from multi-school planning days across the calendar to provide more frequent, shorter school-based learning opportunities.

## HOW MUCH TIME DO TEACHERS NEED?

In a survey of 178 principals in urban high schools undertaking major change efforts, lack of time, energy, and money were identified as the key implementation problems. On average, teachers devoted 70 days of time to implementing a project, while "the more successful schools used 50 days a year of external assistance for training, coaching, and capacity building."

**Source:** "Using time well: Schedules in Essential schools," by Kathleen Cushman, *Horace* 12 (2), Nov. 1995.  
[www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces\\_res/15](http://www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/15).

# Schools That Have Found Time

*To those who say it can't be done, the answer is "it has already been done." These are just a few examples of schools and districts that have found ways to provide regular time within the workday for professional learning.*

## **Ridge Meadows Elementary School, Ellisville, Mo. Early-release days to focus on improving writing**

One day each month, the Rockwood School District releases students in elementary, middle, and high schools in the same quadrants of the district. That allows the entire staff of a school to have an afternoon to work together on a topic of its choosing.

Three times a year, the Ridge Meadows staff uses these early dismissal days to score student writing. All students in grades 1-5 write in response to the same non-fiction prompt. Grade-level teachers design a rubric to score the prompt. Tables are set up in the school gym by grade-level and teachers work together to score the writing samples. When the scoring is ended, teachers then reflect upon what they've learned and how they will change their instruction to improve student writing.

## **Brandon High School, Ortonville, Mich. Late starts provide consistent learning time for teachers**

Every Wednesday morning at Brandon High School is devoted to professional development and teacher collaboration. Teachers begin work at 7:30 a.m. but students don't begin classes until 11 a.m. The high school has a traditional six-period day.

A steering committee composed of staff who volunteer for the assignment design the learning for each Wednesday. That time could be devoted to learning more about technology, interpreting student test data, designing the state-mandated career pathways for students, or doing leadership development activities. Departmental staff frequently use this time to learn more about changes in curriculum or assessments.

Although students are allowed to arrive late, many clubs meet during this time and students have access to computer labs and the school library.

## **Ball High School, Galveston, Texas Run staff development sessions inside prep periods**

An alternating 90-minute block schedule provides teachers with a 90-minute conference or prep period each day. Twice a month, Galveston Ball runs two 45-minute staff development sessions inside each of those conference periods.

The staff development offered during this time is mandatory and interdisciplinary and taught eight times in order to reach the entire staff of 170 teachers.

The school has used this time to teach staff how to write benchmark testing and how to electronically access data on the same testing. Recently, for example, the school did a lengthy workshop of a new writing method. Follow-up meetings occurred during these conference periods after teachers had implemented the new method with students and could talk about the challenges they faced when doing that. Curriculum specialists from the district also have used this time to meet with language arts and math teachers to explore issues.

Teachers can use their regular conference period to meet with colleagues, although entire departments do not share the same conference period.

## **Madison Park School, Phoenix, Ariz. Permanent subs on staff relieve teachers for collaborative time**

Two fulltime substitute teachers provide released time for teachers for professional development during the workday. Teachers sign up for one of the substitute teachers in order to do professional learning on their own, to work with another teacher, or to work with one of the building's master teachers. (Master teachers have only half-day classroom responsibilities and devote the remainder of their time to on-site professional development.) Teachers are allowed to use such released time two to three times each month.

In addition, teachers in this grade 3-8 school agreed to exchange two prep periods a week in order to gain a block of time for collaboration with their grade-level colleagues.

# Schools That Have Found Time

## **Hefferan Elementary School, Chicago, Ill. Set aside one day for professional learning each week**

Teachers exchange their daily planning period for a nearly full day of planning and learning every week. Hefferan teachers teach four full days of academic classes each week and spend the bulk of the fifth day planning together with multi-grade teams and pursuing professional development.

Hefferan students begin this day — known as Resource Day — in their homerooms with a 90-minute reading block. After that, students begin rotating through classes in music, fine arts, computer lab, physical education, library science, and science lab. Students return to their homerooms at the end of the day to collect their homework assignments for that night.

Teachers exchange their daily planning period for this consolidated block of time. They use this time to write lesson plans, work with their grade-level partners to develop curriculum, search for instructional materials, and discuss the needs of their students. They also can use this day to attend workshops or visit other schools to observe classrooms.

## **Spring Woods High School, Houston, Texas Create staff rally days**

Texas' football traditions inspired Spring Woods High School to find a way to adapt the well-identified pep rally schedule for professional time for teachers.

Between 15 and 20 times a year, Spring Woods uses the same bell schedule that governs a pep rally day and creates a "staff rally" day when students are dismissed 30 minutes early to allow teachers time to meet together until their normal work day ends. The faculty of 125 is broken into about a dozen interdisciplinary groups. A member of the Schoolwide Leadership Cadre guides each group and plans how the time will be used. For example, twice a year the cadre selects books that the staff will read and discuss during these meetings.

Spring Woods operates on a four-period block schedule in which teachers teach three periods a day and have one instruction-free conference or prep period. Once a month, that conference period becomes a staff development period. Teachers are required to use half of those conference periods to attend a mandatory discussion or workshop that may focus on topics ranging from a new reading initiative to improving their understanding of the state's standardized testing program.

## **International High School, Long Island, N.Y. Organize teachers into interdisciplinary teams**

The school's 29 teachers and 450 students are organized into six interdisciplinary teams. Teachers have 70 minutes of daily planning time and a half day each week for staff-planned professional development. This amounts to nearly nine hours of shared time each week. The team also has the discretion to decide how to use 500 hours of professional learning time each year.

Team members observe and coach each other; share best practices; develop, evaluate, and revise curricula; and jointly devise interventions for students who need extra support.

Each staff member also leads a small advisory group that meets weekly to discuss issues related to students' personal, academic, and social growth.

## **Camelview Elementary School, Phoenix, Ariz. Create professional growth blocks during the school day**

Teachers in this K-2 school have a 90-minute professional development block four days a week. They spend the first hour in grade-level teams; the final 30 minutes is for individual planning. Teachers have used this time to examine student work, meet as a study group on various issues, examine Arizona's academic standards, and redesign their school's report card.

During the professional growth block, students participate in specials, including social studies and science. Camelview has received additional funding from the Milken Foundation to hire an extra teacher who specializes in social studies and science. This frees other teachers to concentrate on reading, writing, and mathematics.

## **Addison Elementary School, Marietta, Ga. Weekly meeting time for study groups**

Students begin school 10 minutes earlier and end 10 minutes later than other elementary schools in the Cobb County School District. But, on Wednesday afternoons, students leave schools at 1:30 p.m. and teachers assemble in their study groups. Teachers are required to work until 3 p.m., but most of them meet in study groups until about 4 p.m. each Wednesday.

Using district-allocated staff development dollars, teachers are still able to hire subs to enable them to attend meetings and visit other schools for observations. They also participate in district-sponsored staff development activities.

# Districts That Have Found Time

## Montgomery County, Md.

### Knowledgeable substitutes in the classroom

Each of the 193 schools in Montgomery County, Md. has a fulltime staff development teacher whose role is to provide instructional support for teachers in that building. In the elementary schools, this teacher may be involved in team teaching, presenting model lessons, relieving teachers so they can observe other teachers teach, or helping teachers locate needed resource materials. In the secondary schools, the staff development teacher may work with entire departments as a resource teacher or relieve the department chairs to do related work.

In addition, each Montgomery County school has an allocation for a staff development substitute teacher. This teacher, who earns a higher rate of pay than a traditional substitute, is only available to relieve teachers for professional growth. The staff development teacher schedules this substitute teacher's time based on requests from classroom teachers. For example, a teacher might request relief by the staff development substitute in order to spend an afternoon on an action research project or to observe another classroom. Teachers who call in sick or take personal days are replaced by substitutes drawn from the districtwide substitute pool.

## Iowa City, Iowa

### Early-release days for all schools

For 25 years, students at all Iowa City public schools have been released from school an hour early every Thursday in order to provide time for professional development. Elementary school students end their day at 2 p.m. and secondary students at 2:20 p.m. Teachers work until 4 p.m.

Half of those Thursday are designated for building-level staff development; the other half for districtwide staff development. The school and district improvement plans guide most of the professional learning. For example, grade-level teachers might meet on the building-level days to work on common issues. On the district days, teachers from across all schools might meet by subjects or grade-levels or the district may provide its own workshop on a topic (such as using data to design instruction) that would be valuable for all teachers.

In addition, Iowa City uses outside grant money to buy substitute teacher time to enable groups of teachers to work together or attend conferences.

## Jefferson County, Ky.

### Learning time for principals

Teachers aren't the only school employees who need time for professional learning. In Jefferson County, Ky., middle school principals meet for three days each summer with teacher leaders from their schools to focus on standards for key academic areas. Together, they examine data on student learning and develop school improvement plans. During the school year, the principals have monthly staff development days of their own. For half of those days, the principals focus on specific learning within a content area, such as learning more about writing standards. During the other half of those days, the principals break into special interest cohorts, such as integrating technology into instruction, developing leadership skills, or learning more about "knowledge work."

## HOW MUCH TIME DO TEACHERS NEED?

The staff of the Effective Schools Network reports that it takes 10 to 20 teacher days to develop and implement improvement plans.

**Source:** "Using time well: Schedules in Essential schools," by Kathleen Cushman, *Horace 12* (2), Nov. 1995.

[www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces\\_res/15](http://www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/15).

To learn a "moderately difficult teaching strategy could require that teachers receive 20 to 30 hours of instruction in its theory, 15 to 20 classroom demonstrations, and 10 to 15 coaching sessions before mastering the technique and incorporating it into routine classroom practice."

**Source:** *Time for reform*, by Susanna Purnell and Paul Hill (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1992).

# Time for professional learning

*Resources to help you learn more about it*

## “Finding Time for Collaboration”

Mary Anne Raywid, *Educational Leadership*, 51(1), September 1993.

Offers 10 strategies schools are using to create time. Order from ASCD, (800) 933-2723.

## “Making Time for Teacher Professional Development”

Ismat Abdal-Haqq, *ERIC Clearinghouse*, October 1996.

Answers seven frequently asked questions regarding creating time for professional development. Order Digest # 95-4 from ERIC, (202) 293-2450 or order online at [www.ericsp.org/pages/digests/making\\_time\\_teacher\\_pro\\_dev\\_95-4.html](http://www.ericsp.org/pages/digests/making_time_teacher_pro_dev_95-4.html). Price: \$4.

## Prisoners of Time

National Commission on Time and Learning. Washington, DC: Author, 1994.

Key national report on time in schools. Order from the U.S. Government Printing Office, Supt. of Documents, Mail Stop, SSOP, Washington DC, 20402-9328; (202) 783-3238; Stock No. 065-000-00640-5. Price: \$5.50.

## “Scheduling Time to Maximize Staff Development Opportunities”

Brenda Tanner, Robert Canady, and Michael Rettig, *Journal of Staff Development*, 16(4), Fall 1995.

Provides examples of how high schools can structure time to improve instruction and professional learning. Available online at [www.nsd.org/library/jsd/tanner164.html](http://www.nsd.org/library/jsd/tanner164.html).

## “Smart Use of Time and Money”

Joan Richardson, *Journal of Staff Development*, 18(1), Winter 1997.

Explores the issue of resources for professional learning. Available online at [www.nsd.org/library/jsd/richardson181.html](http://www.nsd.org/library/jsd/richardson181.html).

## Teachers Take Charge of Their Learning: Transforming Professional Development for Student Success

National Foundation for Innovation in Education (now the NEA Foundation for Innovation in Education). Washington, DC: Author, 1996.

Addresses rationale for teacher development work and the relationship between teacher learning and student learning. Order from NFIE Publications, P.O. Box 509, West Haven, CT, 06516. Price: \$15.

## “The Time Dilemma in School Restructuring”

Gary D. Watts and Shari Castle, *Phi Delta Kappan*, 75(1), December 1993.

Identifies five primary ways that innovative schools “found” time for professional learning. Order from PDK, (812) 339-1156.

## Time for Reform

Susanna Purnell and Paul Hill. Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1992.

Identifies six strategies schools use to provide time for reform. Order online at [www.rand.org/education/pubs/reform.prior.html](http://www.rand.org/education/pubs/reform.prior.html). Price: \$7.

## “Time: Squeeze, Carve, Apply, Target, Use, Arrange, for Adult Learning”

*Journal of Staff Development*, 20(2), Spring 1999.

The entire issue of the Spring 1999 *JSD* is devoted to exploring various issues related to use of time in schools. Order from NSDC Business Office, (800) 727-7288 or through NSDC

Online Bookstore, [www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm](http://www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm).

## NSDC Online Library

See [www.nsd.org/library/time.html](http://www.nsd.org/library/time.html) for an extensive listing of articles, reports, and other web sites with information about time for professional learning.



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## Enlist staff's help in search for professional learning time

### Ask Dr. Developer



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

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

**Q** *After years of complaining about staff development, the staff at my school suddenly wants more staff development! We introduced some new strategies last year: We started looking at student achievement data and then created a study group to learn more about what we could do to close some of the gaps we found. Teachers really liked that and now they want to do more. But they don't want to do it after school ends every day. So, where do I start to "find" this time that they want?*

**A** Sounds like a nice problem to have. Because of the work you did last year, you've already overcome one big obstacle: Your staff supports this idea because they've already figured out how to effectively use time for professional learning. That's a much better way to start than to create the time and have no idea how to use it.

Begin by ensuring that your staff is very clear about what it wants.

- Are teachers clear about student learning goals and how professional learning will assist them in achieving those goals?
- Do teachers want time every day to

work together? Every week? Every month?

- How much time do they want? Is 30 minutes enough? Is 90 minutes too much?
- Does the entire staff have to have non-instructional time at the same time? Can small groups do this work? If so, how are you going to create those groups?
- What are they willing to change in order to gain this time?
- Perhaps more importantly, what is sacred to them? What are they unwilling to change in order to acquire more time?

Once you've determined exactly what teachers want, share with them some of the examples found in this issue of *Tools for Schools* and on the NSDC web site. Lead a discussion about which ideas might work for your school and which might not. Have teachers brainstorm other possibilities.

Be realistic about the resources you have that could support this work? Do you have funds to buy sub time? Do you have a parents group that could provide resources to support you?

Finally, include parents in your discussions about this potential change — especially if your final plan could impact teacher contact time with students. Garner their support for your new plan by involving them early.

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