

# THE LEARNING Principal®

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF SCHOOL LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

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## THE GIFT OF TIME

*Schools get creative to carve out collaborative time for teachers*

BY VALERIE VON FRANK

Principal Michael Jeffers struggled for years to find a way to give teachers regular times to meet together in professional learning communities. Finally, after several years of discussion, Hickman High School (Columbia, Mo.) will begin classes a half-hour later every Tuesday this school year to allow built-in collaboration time for teachers.

New Principal Melissa Usiak walked into a building in Holt (Mich.) Public Schools that had scheduled early-released days for students every Wednesday for a decade. When she took over the helm in fall 2007, Usiak already knew what to expect.

Every one of the dozen school buildings in the Holt Public Schools operates to afford teachers weekly collaborative time. Elementary buildings dismiss at 1:25 p.m. rather than 3:25



p.m. on Wednesdays, while 5th-6th grade buildings are released at 1:20 p.m. rather than 3:20 p.m. Students in 7th through 12th grades begin class at 10:20 a.m. or 10:45 a.m. on those days.

"This is a structured time, which research says you need set aside, to do that learning," Usiak said. "What a gift to have that time!"

Schools and districts across the country have found ways to embed time for teacher collaboration within the school day. While some do so only during districtwide released days or

before or after school, more and more are finding that allowing teachers time every week during the work day for collaboration is truly the best practice (see box, p. 7).

Hickman High's Jeffers said teachers were able to meet only once a month at his school in the past, and they did so after regular school

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**VICTOR VERGARA**

Principal, Valor  
Middle School  
Woodburn, Ore.

**Grades:** 6-8

**Enrollment:** 493  
students

**Staff:** 37 teachers

Valor Middle School is located in a high-poverty community. Eight in 10 students receive free or reduced-price lunch. About 70% of students are Hispanic and 61% are English language learners, including a large number of Russians. The percentage of students meeting or exceeding state standards has climbed steadily over five years in reading, writing, and math.

## Q&A Professional learning communities change school culture

BY VALERIE VON FRANK

### **Q. What is professional learning like at Valor?**

We can pinpoint a time — five years ago — that we use to talk about “before and after.” Before, we had the kind of days when you don’t want to get up because you know it’s not going to be a happy day for you in your workplace — that’s how every teacher felt at that point.

Then we introduced the concept of professional learning communities. There was a big transformation. We’re talking about the same people. People didn’t leave or get fired, but the mentality changed.

### **Q. How did you get staff involved?**

We created our school improvement team with representation from every learning team, about eight teachers plus administrators. That team meets every Monday at 7:15 a.m. for one hour, and from there those leaders go to their teams and transfer knowledge. They became the specialists.

Then we have daily professional learning community time. Teachers teach five classes and have individual planning time every day, plus a PLC time as well as meeting with their grade-level team. On Monday, for example, they look at student work. Tuesday, they meet with me and we review data and talk about common assessments. Wednesday and Thursday, they work around curriculum and mapping and share ideas. Friday, they talk about specific students and how to help them. It’s pretty intense.

### **Q. What was the first step?**

We started with book studies. Then the team leaders and I talked about how we could apply these stories to Valor. We started talking about specifics, following our school improvement plan, our goals. How are we going to do this with these students? How are we going to do this

with these teams? It’s wasn’t just about reading a book and then be done with the book. The teacher leaders said, “Let’s make sure that we really use our knowledge now.”

### **Q. How does a leader make sure change happens?**

As a new principal, one of first things the staff told me was, “We’ve been around so much new the last few years, please don’t bring anything else.” One of my first goals was to review all they’d studied. That was key. The ideas and concepts were out there, but in a philosophical way. It wasn’t concrete. When people started seeing the connections, this is how you can apply the ideas at Valor in your classroom, that helped them to understand where I was going. On Tuesdays, I go to every team. They expect me to be there and sit with them. I’m not the facilitator; I’m one more participant. We clarify questions, look for answers. We work together.

### **Q. How much time do you spend in classrooms?**

I started with this idea of 5-5-5 my first year as vice principal, to visit five classrooms a day, at least five minutes each classroom, five times a week. Principals have this problem — you have your desk full of papers, kids who want to see you, teachers who want to spend time with you. So there are days when you come, just leave your bag in the office and say, “OK, bye. I’m going to go visit classrooms.” No matter how much paperwork you need to do.

### **Q. What impact have you seen?**

Discipline referrals went from 1,500 the prior year to 300. Five years ago, 8% of kids were passing the state writing test; now, it’s 49%. In reading, it went from 37% to 66%. In math it was 46%, and now it’s 72% passing.

People really believe in Valor now.



Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003).

**REFERENCE**

**Roy, P. & Hord, S. (2003).** *Moving NSDC's staff development standards into practice: Innovation Configurations*. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.

# I am the captain of my ship

To prepare for work with principals on building school-based collaboration, we interviewed a number of high school teachers. We wanted real-life examples of teachers' opportunities to work with their peers and asked when, in their day, they had time for collegial interaction. One math teacher explained that there were few opportunities to even see his colleagues, let alone interact — he saw other teachers sometimes at the coffee pot, maybe at mailboxes, or occasionally by the copier. He drew up his hands, placed them on his hips, and exclaimed, "Then, I go into my classroom and — it's just me and the kids! I am the captain of my ship!"

It was a vivid example, which still reminds me that for experienced educators, their work life has been performed primarily in isolation *from other adults*. They make instructional and curricular decisions alone, plan alone, and carry out their work alone. They rarely have to confer with a colleague. Is it any wonder that when we ask teachers to form learning teams or build a learning community or even make instructional or assessment decisions together that some of them are not very good at accomplishing these joint tasks? The principal, we believe, needs to assist teachers in learning how to work successfully with colleagues (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 95).

Principals should not assume that teachers' caring and concern for students will automatically translate into an ability to use effective collaborative skills when working with their peers. The principal may need to help staff understand the stages of group development (i.e. forming, storming, norming, and performing). The principal also needs to assist teachers in applying trust-building and group decision-making skills

to their work with colleagues.

Risk taking is the other side of the coin of trust and is essential when we ask educators to share their lessons, student work, and videotapes of classroom work. One way to build trust and foster risk taking is to ensure that teachers identify interactional norms and decide how they will keep each other accountable for following those norms. The principal also may have to help educators understand that there are many types of decision-making strategies, such as majority rule or consensus, as well as appropriate times to use each strategy.

The principal will also need to support staff in learning and using effective conflict resolution skills. Contrary to popular belief, an effective group is not one that never disagrees. Effective groups disagree all the time, but members have learned to disagree agreeably so that the group remains intact and highly functioning. They know how to phrase their concerns and differences by focusing on *ideas* instead of people. There are many communication skills that help with effective conflict resolution — paraphrasing, I-messages, describing not labeling, and taking the other person's perspective. I have seen more than one group of expert classroom teachers stymied by their colleagues' behaviors. They could handle the situation if it were a student; with their peers, it is altogether another circumstance.

Lastly, while it is not easy to develop collaborative skills — it is worth it. Teachers learn more and are more likely to apply that learning to the classroom when they have been involved in peer collaboration. Principals have a role in developing these skills, as well as modeling, supporting, and sustaining teachers' growth.

**NSDC STANDARD**

**Collaboration:** Staff development that improves the learning of all students provides educators with the knowledge and skills to collaborate.

WHAT A SCHOOL LEADER NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT ...

# ANALYZING TIME USE



## Analysis of current time usage with time use log

1. How much time in minutes do staff members have for planning?
2. How much time in minutes are staff members expected to attend staff meetings per week/month?
3. How many professional development days are planned into the current school year? When do those days occur? Add the number of minutes available in professional development days. Remember to subtract lunchtime.
4. For one week, log how planning time is used using the Time Use Log on the next page.
5. As a team, graph how all members of the team or staff schoolwide used time collectively by adding the total amount of time used in each category across all members' logs.
6. Identify how much of the available time was spent in school-based team learning.
7. Complete the Time Use Log on the next page. Identify how much of the total available time was invested in work related to the areas in the first column.
8. Use the graph and personal perceptions to consider the impact of various ways time is used by considering these questions:
  - a. What is the difference between the amounts of time spent in individual work versus time spent in collaborative work?
  - b. What kind of time usage is the most satisfying to you?
  - c. What kind of time usage is the least satisfying to you?
  - d. What type of time usage has the greatest impact on achievement of your students?
  - e. What kind of time usage has the greatest impact on your practice as a teacher?
9. Identify the norms/agreements/expectations about time in the school.
10. Consider how to increase the kind of time usage that is most satisfying to you and that has the greatest impact on achievement of your students.

### Source:

*Collaborative Professional Learning in Schools and Beyond: A Tool Kit for New Jersey Educators*, by Joellen Killion. Oxford, OH: New Jersey Department of Education and National Staff Development Council, 2006, p. 117.

# TIME USE LOG

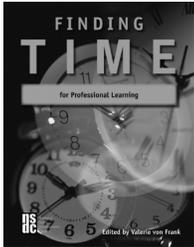
Use the log to identify how non-instructional time is spent on various tasks and indicate if that time is spent alone or in collaboration with one or more colleagues.

**A = alone**      **C = collaboration with one or more colleagues**

AREAS	Monday		Tuesday		Wednesday		Thursday		Friday		Total min.
	# min.	A/C	# min.	A/C	# min.	A/C	# min.	A/C	# min.	A/C	
<b>Management/ clerical</b> (attendance, non-academic reports, business transaction, copying, getting supplies, etc.)											
<b>Assessment</b> (analyzing student work, grading student work, designing assessments, etc.)											
<b>School-focused work</b> (committee work, etc.)											
<b>District-focused work</b> (committee work, etc.)											
<b>Non-school related</b> (personal phone calls, errands, etc.)											
<b>Other</b>											
<b>Other</b>											
<b>Other</b>											
<b>Total daily time</b>											
<b>Total alone</b>											
<b>Total collaborative</b>											

**Source:**  
*Collaborative Professional Learning in Schools and Beyond: A Tool Kit for New Jersey Educators*, by Joellen Killion. Oxford, OH: New Jersey Department of Education and National Staff Development Council, 2006, p. 118.

## Schools get creative to carve out learning time for teachers



### FROM THE NSDC BOOKSTORE

#### Finding Time for Professional Learning

Edited by Valerie von Frank

A compilation of articles and tools about time published in NSDC's newsletters and *JSD* in the last decade. Includes suggestions about how to use the articles to guide the discussion about time in your school and district. (NSDC, 2007)

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hours. "It just didn't work," he said. "Teachers had bought into the value of collaboration, but the time structure was really dragging it down." Finding a consistent time to meet within the work day has been "a huge morale boost for our staff," he said.

"I believe collaboration is the only way you're ever going to have the fundamental change you need for teachers to really talk about how they're going to help students become more successful," Jeffers said.

"You've got to give teachers the time to work together, to work on things like common assessments and teaching strategies, and to talk about results.

"Teachers get the message that what they are doing is important: If they're given time, they're going to make good use of the time," he continued. "I've already seen results from departments that have established common assessments, where staff are having great conversations around student results; they're working together. They've built camaraderie in the building."

The high school teachers arrive at their usual 7:20 a.m., but with the half-hour of student-free time, they now have an hour to meet together each week. Classes are 45 minutes rather than 50 minutes on Tuesdays, and the students' day is extended by five minutes the remainder of the week.

Jeffers said staff also meet in interdisciplinary teams once a month around a schoolwide theme. Teachers who might not have gotten to know each other or work together meet and talk about common strategies and ways to improve student learning. "We just went through our North Central Association evaluation," Jeffers said, "and the time was invaluable for doing some of the work we needed to do for that accreditation."

### OVERCOMING HURDLES

Jeffers said a number of "rules" played into the school's proposal to the Columbia Public

Schools board for this year's pilot of early dismissal. He set these parameters:

**Rule No. 1: Maintain the length of teachers' work week.** Jeffers said teachers' contracted time was not altered by including their regular arrival time and carving out the additional 30 minutes from student contact time.

**Rule No. 2: Get staff commitment to the collaborative time.** "We started talking about collaboration, and we were having once a month or once every six weeks — and really that's

not collaboration," Jeffers said. "It needs to be a sustained time, at least once a week, built into the school day. When teachers had seen the value of the time, we had a referendum of the faculty as to whether they wanted to ask the district to pilot this collaborative model. And 84% (of the 185 teachers) said yes."

**Rule No. 3: Don't touch the buses.** The ripple effect on other

schools' busing routes of changing Hickman's bused-in students' arrival time would make it difficult for the revised schedule to be accepted, Jeffers said. Instead, bused students are allowed in restricted areas within the building from 7:45 a.m. to 8:15 a.m., including the library, computer lab, cafeteria, or commons area, and administrators provide supervision.

**Rule No. 4: Communicate with stakeholders.** The school sent parents information over the summer, discussed the change at Open House, and received media coverage of the change. "Make sure everyone's on board," Jeffers said.

### EFFORTS PAY OFF

Jeffers said the change hasn't been easy. The school includes a career center with students from all over the district, and their schedules did not match and had to be coordinated. Students are getting used to the late-start days and have to be reminded not to loiter on private property surrounding the school, he said. But he believes the extra effort is more than worth it.

"It's a way for people to feel like they're

*Continued on p. 7*

### NSDC'S BELIEF

Schools' most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.

## Schools find time for adults to learn

In these schools and others across the country, a shortened student day once a week has become the norm for finding time for teachers' professional development. The schools have carefully planned to meet state requirements for instructional time.

Consider these examples:

- Classes begin 30 minutes late on Wednesdays at **Holtville High School** in **Holtville, Calif.** Teachers arrive a half-hour earlier than their scheduled time on other workdays, giving them one hour for collaborative planning in study groups.
- At **Sarah Cobb Elementary School** in **Americus, Ga.**, students are released one day a week at 1:30 p.m. instead of the regular 3:30 p.m. dismissal time. Since the school already exceeded the state's requirement for instructional time, it did not have to add time to the remaining school days. The school received a waiver from the Georgia Board of Education for early release.
- On Mondays in **Jackson Elementary School** in **Greeley, Colo.**, students leave at 1:45 p.m. and teachers leave at 4:25 p.m.
- **Hefferan Elementary School**, on the

west side of Chicago, provides large blocks of training and planning time for teachers during school hours.

In addition to individual schools, some districts have committed to providing this job-embedded time:

- A number of elementary schools in California's **San Diego Unified School District** have one day a week when students are dismissed two hours earlier so teachers have time for professional development.
- **Iowa City, Iowa**, schools release students an hour early every Thursday and teachers stay at school until 4 p.m.
- Students at all of the six schools in **Woodford County, Ky.**, are dismissed two hours early on one Wednesday a month. Teachers use time after school on another Wednesday a month to meet in study groups rather than having a faculty meeting.
- **Carman-Ainsworth Community Schools** in **Flint, Mich.**, gives teachers an hour every Wednesday morning to meet, scheduling students to begin an hour later and having teachers report 15 minutes earlier than usual.



### SAMPLE SCHOOL SCHEDULES

For a sample high school and elementary school schedule, see "Target time toward teachers," by Linda Darling-Hammond in the Spring 1999 issue of *Journal of Staff Development*, 20(2), 31-36.

Available online at [www.nsd.org/publications/articleDetails.cfm?articleID=51](http://www.nsd.org/publications/articleDetails.cfm?articleID=51).

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part of something, to have input and interact," he said. "That time is for teachers to be involved without impeding on everything else on their plate. This is not overload because it's built into the day. ... It's not easy. Tuesday mornings are not my favorite time as an administrator. But those are things you have to trade off; think of the greater good."

Usiak said that, despite Holt's decade of experience in having the time, the district is in a continuous cycle of evaluation for how best to use it.

"There's an evolution here in how we spend our time," she said. "We're redefining what we use that time for, setting parameters and structures. I'm really trying to get the staff to rethink what these Wednesdays are for; I really want

them focused on student work and student data."

In Boyle County Schools in Kentucky, where students are dismissed two hours early one Wednesday a month, Assistant Superintendent Michael LaFavers said his district has spent a decade "getting it right." Students regularly achieve in the top tier in central Kentucky, and while LaFavers doesn't give all the credit to any one initiative, he said finding released time for teacher collaboration is important.

"If you don't create time for professionals to work together to talk about student learning, assessment, about whether students are making progress," LaFavers said, "you're going to suffer the consequences as a school district. You *have* to figure out some way to create the time. This is one way you can do that, and it's been effective for us." ■

**ISSN 1937-6855**

The *Learning Principal* is published eight times a year by the National Staff Development Council, 504 S. Locust St., Oxford, OH 45056, for \$49 of each membership. Periodicals postage paid at Wheelersburg, Ohio and additional offices.

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## Register for NSDC's Annual Conference

If you haven't yet registered, log on to [www.nsdcc.org/conference08](http://www.nsdcc.org/conference08) to sign up for NSDC's 40th Annual Conference Dec. 6-10 in Washington, D.C. Experience a sense of community as you interact with educators from every corner of the U.S., Canada, and beyond. Shared meals and lively discussion are part of the culture of the conference and highlights of the experience.

Consider what a survey of participants in NSDC's 2007 Annual Conference revealed:

- Three-fourths of participants work directly in a school district.
- 95% agreed that they felt a sense of community at the conference.
- Nine out of 10 attendees found the conference afforded opportunities for them to spend time reflecting and having dialogue with peers.
- 97% of respondents said they left with ideas they could

and would implement in their schools.

- Three out of four indicated they had made valuable new professional contacts.

"I am taking actions in my conversations with others back home this morning," one conference-goer commented. "I'm also

putting together a next-steps one-pager."

Another would recommend the conference for several reasons:

"Being present with a community of like-

minded colleagues; being challenged intellectually by top-flight thinkers and educators; and a chance to remove yourself from the daily churn of your home institution to learn and reflect."

The conference theme, "Step Up and Speak Out," serves as a challenge to attendees to stand and be counted among those committed to taking action to achieve NSDC's purpose: *Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.*

STEP UP  
&  
SPEAK OUT

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