

13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

MAKING A SERIOUS STUDY OF

Classroom scenes

HIGH SCHOOL FACULTY DEVELOPS A WAY TO OBSERVE AND LEARN FROM EACH OTHER

By Valerie von Frank

After seven years of working in learning communities — thinking about ways to improve their practice and looking at student work — the teachers at Granby Memorial High School in Granby, Conn., weren't satisfied.

They appreciated the weekly professional learning team time, but they wanted to go deeper. So, in 2007, the faculty suggested a new form of collaboration —

regular job-embedded time observing each other teaching.

"It's not often teachers come to you and ask for something like this, so when they do and they're so engaged and positive about the process, it inspires me to say, 'We have to find a way to make this work,'" said Patricia Law, vice principal. "We'd been working together in learning communities, learning to work as a group, to have a common goal, to be able to discuss and gather data around that goal. It seemed like a natural step."

Administrators spent the summer



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reviewing the literature for a research base for the idea and developed a process they believed would work. They didn't find an exact model, but created a process that is almost a cross between lesson study and medical grand rounds. Groups of two to four teachers have one class period each month to observe a peer teaching. That time is followed by another period, preferably the same day, discussing a point the observed teacher may have requested or other observations.

Administrators have no part in these observations, other than asking what teachers learned from the experience. "We do not go into the classrooms while they are peer sharing with each other," Law said. "We let them have that time. But we ask them to be able to point to changes in practice they have gotten from this process."

The protocol

Peer sharing occurs during one week each month on Mondays, Tuesdays, or Fridays, when students have eight-period days with 40-minute classes. (On Wednesdays and Thursdays, students have longer block periods to accommodate a weekly, one-hour time for teachers to meet in their learning communities to work on goals drawn from student data.)

Law admits scheduling 70 teachers is a complex task that takes months. She makes sure teachers are pulled from only one class a month, and never the same class period twice. The follow-up session occurs during a study hall or prep period, she said. She then makes sure the teachers who miss a preparation period get an extra one on another day.

Three substitute teachers are hired on the peer-sharing days and rotate through the classrooms to free the teachers. Dates are scheduled before the school year begins, and teachers are asked not to schedule field trips, personal days, or any other activity during that time, a requirement that emphasizes the importance of the learning.

Once the peer-sharing teams are set, teachers find out whether the observed teacher wants to

focus on a specific question, and the group discusses whether to interact with students or what other expectations the observed teacher has. The groups then use an observation sheet to focus their work.

Initially, the observation sheet didn't include reflections for what observers might learn, a section added in now. As teachers began the process, they recognized that the value of observing is in stimulating reflection both for the observed teacher and those observing — the

reason the faculty termed the process peer sharing rather than peer coaching.

Fine-tuning

That kind of fine-tuning has occurred throughout the year the school has practiced these rounds. Refinement began even as the process was proposed.

At the start of the 2007-08 year, administrators presented a summary of their summer's research to department heads, modeling the proposal with teacher videos, having dialogue about what they saw.

"We said, 'OK, what works; what doesn't?'" Law said. The idea then was modeled with the full staff at the beginning of the school year before being implemented.

One adjustment made for the 2008-09 school year, based on teacher feedback, was to schedule teachers in department-based groups for half the year, with different team members each month observing teachers within their own subject area. The other half of the year, the teachers work in interdisciplinary groups.

Work also occurred on helping teachers not only learn what to observe, but how to talk about it. The staff worked on ways to begin the conversations around their observations, something the teachers had initially pointed out as difficult.

"How do you say something after observing a lesson?" Law said teachers asked. "Saying, 'That was nice; good job' — the observation has to be more meaningful than that."

Art teacher Hollie Hecht said her rounds have given her insights into her teaching practice both

NSDC'S BELIEF

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

WHY IMPLEMENT PEER SHARING?

- Share "craft knowledge"
- Add to the school's collaborative focus (PLCs, teams, departments)
- Help teachers broaden their repertoire of instructional strategies
- Improve our understanding of what we know about best practices in teaching and learning
- Respond to teacher requests
- Support a school goal to increase student achievement

Source: Granby Memorial High School, Granby, Conn.

by observing her colleagues — and her students.

“I was thrilled to be in a classroom to see how other people teach,” Hecht said, “and also to see how students that we share may behave differently depending on the subject area, and even teaching structure and style. They may excel for one teacher and struggle in another” class.

Hecht said the nonjudgmental aspect of the process is the basis for its benefits. “We remind ourselves that it is peer sharing, not peer coaching,” Hecht said. “It is presented to be reflective and helpful. ... If it can help to inform our teaching, why not do it?”

School administrators have looked for the evidence of why to do it, evaluating how effective the process is during their regular administrative walk-throughs. Law said they see changes.

“Teachers are trying and using Marzano’s nine instructional strategies in different ways,” Law said, referring to *Classroom Instruction that Works*, by Robert Marzano, Debra Pickering, and Jane Pollock (ASCD, 2001). “Teachers are more reflective in conversations with us and with their peers. We have a reduction in isolation.”


Although teachers have not yet begun to create interdisciplinary units, Law said, she said she has noticed increased interdisciplinary collaboration.

“I think there’s also increased trust within the building,” she said. “It takes a lot of trust to feel comfortable making those comments or suggestions during the debriefing.”

Essential learning

Law emphasizes that peer sharing can be created only when a supportive culture has been established.

She said opening doors was less difficult for teachers used to weekly walk-throughs by school



“Perhaps no practice evokes more apprehension among educators than the prospect of our peers camping out in the back of our classroom for a few hours and watching us engage in the difficult art of teaching.

“Yet there is no more powerful way of learning and improving on the job than by observing others and having others observe us.”

– Roland S. Barth,
Relationships Within the Schoolhouse

administrators and monthly walk-throughs by district administrative teams. She said students also were not disturbed since they were used to other adults dropping in informally.

“As a district, we are steeped in the idea of looking at practice, talking about what is best instructional practice, and looking to always gather data, have professional dialogue, and using that to move forward,” Law said.

“Would it work for everybody?” she continued. “Probably not. It takes a strong base of knowledge about what collaboration is and why it’s important. ... I think it fits for who we are as a school and where we are in the process of collaboration. This professionally develops our teachers in a way that meets their specific needs. It’s probably one of the most important things we do.” ♦

PEER SHARING IS:

- Supportive
- Confidential
- Reflective
- Skill-building
- Collaborative
- Inspiring
- Informal
- Nonjudgmental
- Nonevaluative

Source: Granby Memorial High School, Granby, Conn.

▲ Tools

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