

BELIEVE IN THE CAPACITY OF PEOPLE TO INVENT THEIR OWN SOLUTIONS

Recently, a superintendent from a suburb of Dallas, Texas, approached me to discuss the challenge of finding time for learning teams to meet. He assured me that the district had a clear set of goals to address during the time as well as a plan for evaluating whether the goals were achieved. The school system had found the time for high school and middle school teachers to meet, but had not been as successful in finding time for elementary teachers. He wanted to identify a solution that was as effective for elementary teachers as the solution the district was implementing at the middle and high school levels.

His district did not have to be convinced of the value of daily team-based learning for all teachers. The district embraces NSDC's purpose: Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves. To achieve this purpose, educators must spend the equivalent of several hours each week in team meetings examining the data they have available to determine to what degree their students are achieving the standards they are required to master. They use some of the time to plan lessons together, making sure to tap the expertise of all teachers on a grade level or in a subject area. They also need time to create common assessments that measure to what degree students are successfully meeting standards. If they find some students are not successfully meeting standards and they have exhausted the solutions of the group, then they determine their learning needs and where they might seek help. The district leaders are convinced that it is essential that every elementary teacher experience this ongoing cycle of improvement in order for all students to have equitable opportunities for success.

I applaud the superintendent for his commitment to provide his elementary teachers with the same level of support he is providing his secondary teachers. I asked how the district had been able to provide daily team learning time for all secondary teachers. He told me that members of his central office team had determined that if teachers agreed to a small increase in class size, the district could develop a schedule that provided every teacher with a team planning period. Teachers voted to determine the percentage that supported such an option. An overwhelming

majority supported the option, and the district created the new schedule. While the district is in its first year of implementation, central office staff members already recognize the need to monitor and support this process over the long term to ensure that all teams consistently engage in the continuous cycle of improvement.

Since this decision has been so popular thus far, the superintendent is feeling increased pressure to find a solution to support the elementary teachers. Even the school board was pleading with the superintendent to find an elementary solution as soon as possible. Knowing the dilemmas different levels of schools encounter, I had to be frank. There was probably not a single solution for the elementary schools like the one he had found for the secondary schools. However, I agreed to outline some potentially viable options. I recommended that he share all options with members of his cabinet and perhaps a few lead principals and teachers. Here are some of the more popular approaches to creating elementary team learning time:



In each issue of *JSD*, Stephanie Hirsh will share a professional learning challenge and possible solutions that create results for educators and their students. All columns are available at www.nsd.org.

- **Schedule team learning during "specials."**

Schools that are fortunate enough to have special teachers for physical education, music, art, or library can configure the schedule to provide consecutive time for all teachers in the same grade level to meet. This may result in elementary teams meeting a few times a week for longer periods of time as compared to every day. I have read about a school that held all specials on Fridays and all grade-level teachers used Fridays as their weekly meeting times. This schedule should allow for special teachers to meet as a learning team for several hours a week as well.

- **Schedule substitutes to release teachers.**

Most schools have substitute money for teachers to attend workshops and conferences away from the school. A frequent complaint of teachers who are required to participate in their own version of adult pullout programs is that these opportunities rarely meet their needs. Why not reframe how schools are expected to use their substitute dollars? These dollars should be used to ensure that teachers have time to meet with their colleagues in regularly scheduled sessions focused on issues that are pertinent to the challenges they have identified in their classrooms.

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- **Adopt a modified weekly schedule.**

Under most modified weekly schedules, schools find ways to release all students so that all teachers have the same time for team meetings and learning. These options can include late start one morning a week or every other week, or early release one afternoon a week or every other week. Typically, schools bank or add extra minutes to the other days so that the modified schedule does not result in fewer instructional minutes. Frequently, elementary schools will work with their community care providers to enlist their help with a modified schedule. Unfortunately, while parents want teachers to have the time for team learning, they often cannot afford the inconvenience it creates for them.

Consider variations of these three approaches:

- a. Principal and counselors plan weekly lessons for entire student body meetings that release teachers to meet together;
- b. Grade levels double up students to release colleagues for their team meetings (i.e. 5th-grade buddies work with 1st-grade students);
- c. Teacher aides and/or parent volunteers supervise independent work time so that teachers have time for team learning;
- d. Tutors work with students while teachers meet in learning teams.

While each of these options may work for some schools, there is probably not one universal solution that best meets the needs of all elementary schools. Therefore, I often recommend to school leaders that they let each school determine its own plan. Under this scenario, the school system establishes the parameters for an acceptable solution and allows each school to present its plan. Potential parameters might include:

- The plan must have the support of 80% of the faculty

and more than 50% of the voting parents.

- The plan cannot alter the instructional minutes allocated by more than 10% per week.
- The solution must be applicable to all teachers.

These are just sample parameters. I recommend the superintendent's executive committee prepare the parameters before presenting any options to the schools. I also suggest giving each school a small planning grant to cover costs of substitutes and refreshments so that a leadership team can convene to create the school plan. For obvious reasons, I believe this planning should take place during the school day.

I firmly believe that teachers have the capacity to develop solutions that best meet their needs and the needs of their students. I believe that if the teachers know that their learning and teamwork is in the best interests of their students, they will be able to find a scheduling solution that works for them. They might begin by considering the strengths and weaknesses of the options above, but experience has taught me they will ultimately move on to what works best for their school and their students.

Some schools have great partners to help them with after-school challenges, some schools have strong PTAs, and some have special grants and resources that provide for extra support. However, all schools share the essential resource needed to make this work — they are enriched by the creativity of the staff. Believing in the capacity of people to invent their own solutions will enable the district to ensure all elementary schools have the time they need to meet their learning needs and academic goals set for their students.

I am eager to learn the direction the superintendent takes with this challenge. Please let me know: What is your next challenge? ■

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