

Ambassadors *of* LEARNING

TEACHERS' ENTHUSIASM
BUILDS MOMENTUM
FOR DISTRICT'S
LONG-RUNNING PROGRAM

BY VALERIE VON FRANK

When Leslee Fritz moved with her son, Dustin, to a suburb of Lansing, Mich., she found Wednesdays were more than just the middle of the week. In Holt Public Schools, every Wednesday is time for teachers' professional development, and that means the students' day is shorter by two hours to allow it.

"I asked a lot of parents" about the unusual schedule, Fritz recalled. "They shrugged and said, 'That's the way it's always been.'"

Through two decades and three superintendents, Holt has stuck with a system of job-embedded professional learning time that many individual schools, never mind districts, find hard to get started. What has sus-

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tained the system is a culture in which teachers have claimed their time and created the support they needed both in the community and within a state with a tradition of strong teachers unions.

A FRESH IDEA

Ask Superintendent Johnny Scott how long Holt has afforded teachers this time, and he can't pinpoint the year, though he formerly was principal at the junior high. Neither can Tom Davis, the superintendent before Scott, nor Eric Pulver, the teachers association president. It likely began in 1990, according to an old newsletter article, but the educators are more focused on the purpose, use, and value of the time.



Photo by VALERIE VON FRANK

Principal Melissa Usiak, at right, leads a learning session as teachers meet for several hours during the workday for their regular collaborative time.

Davis said the idea for embedded learning time began at the high school, when a group of high school teachers applied for and received a small grant for released time to study what effective schools in the nation were doing.

“We wanted to get better,” said Davis, who was then the high school principal before becoming superintendent. “The faculty determined that every school they reviewed as exemplary had company time for collaboration, time for faculty to learn together.”

The hitch was paying the cost, Davis said. He said the districts that the team studied had received grants

or were in wealthy suburbs, unlike Holt. He challenged the teachers to solve the problem of cost, and they did.

They came up with a proposal to take contractual time from before and after school, allowing teachers to arrive and leave just minutes before and after students, and to use that time to block out 2½ hours one morning every week. Students would arrive two hours after their normal start, and teachers would work in groups on topics they identified. Davis was on board. The next step was to build support among colleagues, the teachers association, school board, and the community.

SCHOOL SCHEDULES

Grades K-4

Full days: 8:35 a.m. to 3:25 p.m.
Wednesdays: 8:35 a.m. to 1:25 p.m.

Grades 5-6

Full days: 8:30 a.m. to 3:20 p.m.
Wednesdays: 8:30 a.m. to 1:20 p.m.

Grades 7-12

Full days: 7:35 a.m. to 2:35 p.m.
Wednesdays (Grades 7-8):
10:20 a.m. to 2:35 p.m.
Wednesdays (Grade 9):
10:45 a.m. to 2:35 p.m.
Wednesdays (Grades 10-12):
10:35 a.m. to 2:35 p.m.

The dozen or so lead teachers who had studied the matter took their ideas to a faculty vote.

“They conveyed the importance of common learning time and what a cool idea it was — that teachers would be involved in planning those days; it wouldn’t be just the principal telling them what to do,” Davis said. For his part, he emphasized that the proposal was a pilot and asked faculty to vote each year for the first several years on moving forward. In addition, he asked for more than a simple majority vote in order to continue.

The faculty group also took the proposal to the superintendent and the teachers association, and they hammered out a letter of agreement to allow the time. Davis said the fact that the initiative was driven by a group of strong teacher leaders smoothed the way for agreement.

The faculty group made a presentation to the school board, whose members agreed to the idea if it didn’t add expenses and if the community agreed. The district set up three community forums, got the word out through the newspaper, put articles in school publications, and invited media to come to board meetings and the forums to hear lead faculty and



Photo by VALERIE VON FRANK

Kathy Kish, left, and Jill Danbrook, teachers at Sycamore Elementary School in Holt, Mich., exchange ideas during their professional learning time.

Davis explain the proposal.

“It was a matter of defining the importance of teacher learning,”

Davis said. “We talked about how teachers graduate from college and have little or no additional training 30 years later, and how ridiculous that was. We’re in one of the most innovative jobs in the world.

“Our basic message was that we have so much work to do, so many difficult challenges, that we really need research and development time — as any company has — so our teachers can continually improve,” he said. About 50 to 60 residents attended the forums, and the opposition dissipated.

“The big thing was that the staff was doing this for no cost to the district,” Davis said. “The adults who are affecting kids every day are learning together for 2½ hours each week, and it’s not costing the district or the community a dime. That was huge.”

Davis said the district surveyed parents each year for several years, interviewed students, and kept meticulous records of student attendance and learning. He provided the school board with monthly written reports of what teachers did during their learn-

ing time and made public presentations at board meetings twice a year.

“In the beginning,” he said, “it was a massive amount of work, but it toned down through the years as the board got more confident.”

THE LEARNING GROWS

As the high school modeled the learning, the idea spread to the junior high, and then elementary teachers, too, began clamoring for time to work together. In 2001, elementary teachers formed a committee to plan how they might alter schedules to allow for common learning time.

Laura Avis, a 29-year veteran teacher, was on the team that proposed extending professional learning time to elementary school teachers. The Wednesday time “was the chance to explore, to go deeper, to find the latest things going on in education” that teachers wanted, she said.

At the elementary level, bus schedules and child care options made it more optimal to dismiss students two hours early rather than bring

them in late. Students are given the option of fee-based after-school care or enrichment class. Again, the key was not adding expense to the district’s budget — where it could be cut if the district faced financial hard times.

Pulver, the teachers association president, said the way teachers use the time has varied over the years. He said at the secondary level, a steering committee helps structure the time in conjunction with the schools’ administration. The committee sets annual goals, such as examining new state grade-level expectations, creating common assessments, or finding ways of examining one another’s practices.

For their learning time, teachers meet once a month as a whole faculty, then have two sessions in which they meet as learning teams, followed by another Wednesday working in department teams.

Pulver said two decades of experience have enabled high school staff to guide their own learning and continually reinvent how they work. At the elementary schools, he noted, learning still is more principal-guided until staff have more experience.

Superintendent Scott said the district wanted the six elementaries to have similar curricular experiences at



Laura Avis

first, to “let them have some common conversations.” Each year, he said, the district looks at how the time is used and, for the elementaries, is gradually moving control to the buildings.

A CONTINUOUS CYCLE OF LEARNING

As teachers arrive at the Sycamore Elementary School library, a slide on the large screen reads, “An Introduction to Professional Learning Communities.” A busy morning has given way at 1:30 p.m. to time for adults only.

Near the vegetable tray and drinks, Principal Melissa Usiak urges staff members to get a snack and then gets them up and moving. “We need oxygen to the brain,” she enthuses. She starts with “Just Like Me,” giving one-sentence pronouncements about herself and asking teachers to stand up and shout back “Just like me!” when it applies.

“I’ve seen the Barenaked Ladies in concert.” “I drive an American-made car.” The enthusiasm mounts, slowly, with more participating as the list goes on, jumping up, arms raised, to shout, “Just like me!” Her next reference is to the state standardized test.

“I believe we can beat the MEAP!” Usiak concludes. “We better stand up on that one!” a teacher says, grinning.

Usiak next reminds them of the Concerns-Based Adoption Model, the stages of teaming and the self-identified stage they have reached as a staff, then leads the group through answering staff-generated questions about a new schoolwide process of student behavioral intervention.

Her aim, she says later, is to have staff working in grade-level teams on specific goals, but they have not yet reached that point. These teachers are a mix of those new to the building and many who have taught there for years, and they are redefining how they work together, along with the

“Professional development should make our doing the job every other minute of the week easier. Maybe we have to take home some paperwork that 20 years ago we would have graded at our desks before students got to school — that’s the trade-off.

“Professional development is invaluable. It makes the job of the teacher more effective, and therefore it’s more rewarding and enjoyable for all involved. The key is it has to be effective. It can’t be just sit and listen to the consultant who came in from down the street talk to you for two hours about the next best thing.

“It’s teachers working together on curriculum, on creating a learning culture, constantly working on how can we do what we’re doing better. ... Sometimes we as professionals are sold a little short. We can come up with amazing stuff if we’re allowed to.”

— Eric Pulver, president of the Holt Education Association and Holt High School teacher



**Holt Public Schools
Holt, Mich.**

Grades: Pre-K-12
Schools: Six K-4; two 5-6; one 7-8; one 9th-grade campus; one 10-12
Enrollment: 6,000
Staff: 315
Racial/ethnic mix:
White: 78.6%
Black: 9.2%
Hispanic: 6.3%
Asian/Pacific Islander: 2.5%
Native American: 0.5%
Other: 3%
Limited English proficient: less than 1%
Languages spoken: 20
Free/reduced lunch: 30.4%
Special education: 22.4%
Contact: Johnny A. Scott, superintendent
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ferences and brought information back,” Usiak says to the staff, bringing them back together. “We also know another way to use that money is to be able (to hire substitute teachers to allow us) to go into each others’ classrooms. ... I want to be explicit, to keep these five characteristics (Hord has outlined), and you figure out how to use the (professional learning time).”

But for this day, their time is up. A veteran hastily exits. A few teachers linger to chat. But two hours have passed, and it’s 3:45 p.m. These teachers have finished their workday, including their time for learning.

ONGOING EDUCATION

Sarah Stovall, a 2nd-grade teacher at Sycamore, taught for nine years in private schools before coming to Holt. She is an enthusiastic supporter of the learning days.

“In the private sector, I would have staff meetings once a week, and they would tell you housekeeping things,” she said. “They didn’t have anything that really guided our teaching. We were given a curriculum and told, ‘Go and teach it.’ Here, we talk about how to be effective and how we

second-year principal.

Usiak motions to the overhead. “PLCs has become a buzzword,” she tells the teachers. “I don’t want to throw it around lightly.” She asks teachers to read a *JSD* article by Shirley Hord and summarize main points with their table groups.

“In the past, people went to con-

can support each other. I don't feel alone, because once a week we come together to collaborate and share. I am not intimidated to go to my peers and say, 'Can you help me with this?' We feel open to be able to talk to each other."

Support for job-embedded time is not unanimous. Some community members and teachers express dissatisfaction with issues created by job-embedded time.

Trying to focus on learning after hours of teaching is a challenge, a teacher said. Elementary teachers are frustrated that their professional development has sometimes seemed off-target. They want more opportunities to interact beyond their own buildings.

And Fritz, a single parent, has had to hire a university student to help out on Wednesday mornings so she can get to work. She says parents have found varied solutions for secondary students — from having neighborhood kids gather at one nonworking parent's house to relying on an older sibling or simply trusting the student to be able to catch the bus on time.

Still, Fritz recalled the "random days" off her son Dustin experienced in his prior district, which also required her to find child care. "While this has its challenges," she said, "I'm not sure that was any easier."

Davis said the key to sustaining the system is a constant process of informing everyone of the value of teachers' common time.

"One of my parting comments to the board and new superintendent was not to get complacent," he said, "because we have new teachers, new parents all the time, hundreds of kids new to the district every year."

CURRENT STATE OF LEARNING

Superintendent Johnny Scott's office is spare: a desk, the requisite round table, three or four bookcases



Photo by VALERIE VON FRANK

Sycamore Elementary School teachers Marquita Glenn, from left, Sarah Stovall, and Tabitha Cox reflect individually on a question posed by their principal before they begin working together to address the matter.

with many binders and a few published titles: *Skillful Leader*, *Failure Is Not an Option*, *Building Engaged Schools*.

Scott moved from principal to superintendent, and the board didn't advertise the position. His understanding of the district was clear. And from time working in a Florida high school that had job-embedded learning to completing his doctorate at Michigan State University, Scott has been clear about the importance of teachers' professional learning.

"Embedded time gives practitioners less down time between the time they learn something and the time they go back and can experiment with it," he said.

Although he said evidence of the effect on student learning is mostly anecdotal, all the system's schools have scored A's and B's on the state report card, and all but the high school made Adequate Yearly Progress in 2007. "We may not be able to quantify what's happening here," Scott noted, "but students are able to talk

about what it is that they're learning."

He said it hasn't been difficult to continue to engage teachers and the community in building on the existing system of professional development.

"The way we have built momentum to sustain this initiative is through the work we've accomplished. Teachers truly see this as a beneficial time, as informing their practice, and consequently it has momentum. Our best ambassadors are the frontline people."

Asked whether he ever considered not having the Wednesday time, he seemed almost puzzled.

"Wherever your priorities are, you figure out a way to accomplish those. I think investing in our people is the priority of Holt schools," Scott said. "We realize education is a human endeavor, and we have to make sure our practitioners have opportunities to interact, to learn about and acquire best practices.

"Professional development is a staple of our district." ■