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WEEKEND WISDOM

Stimulus funds boost professional learning and add Saturday option

By Valerie von Frank

Saturday School isn't just for students anymore. Students have been able to get tutoring in Milwaukee Public Schools on the weekend. And now this year, the district is using federal stimulus money to



Some sessions are offered at a community college with computer labs and LCD projectors.

create Saturday Academies for teachers' professional learning.

Milwaukee Public Schools has so far received just over \$100 million in stimulus money through various funds for the next two years, bolstering its \$950 million annual 2009 budget as state aid is being cut. Of that stimulus money, about \$15 million or 15% is allocated to additional professional development districtwide. "Professional development is the key strategy both for closing the achievement gap and retaining staff," Superintendent William G. Andrekopoulos said in presenting the 2009 district budget to the Board of School Directors' Strategic Planning and Budget Committee.

One part of that emphasis is the Saturday Academies, offered monthly. Teachers voluntarily attend half-day sessions and are paid based on their daily rate for their time. The district has budgeted \$3.4 million of the stimulus money for these learning opportunities over the next two years.

The focus on professional development

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NSDC tool

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came out of six years of not making Adequate Yearly Progress under the No Child Left Behind Act, according to Takisha Weatherall-Jones, professional development specialist.

“Being a district identified for improvement under NCLB and having multiple mandates for corrective action spurred us toward more coordinated efforts” that include ongoing learning for teachers, she said. “There are increased expectations for teachers’ professional development.”

The district cannot mandate professional learning outside teachers’ workdays under the teacher association contract, so the federal money is allowing teachers to improve their practices in a way not previously possible in the cash-strapped district by providing pay for their added time.

“We believe teacher effectiveness is the No. 1 factor in student achievement,” Weatherall-Jones said. “Professional development enhances our ability to affect student achievement through teacher learning.”

Saturday learning

The Academy learning experience is structured on a staff development model articulated by Joyce and Showers (1980) that includes five components, the first of which is imparting knowledge, followed by modeling, practice, feedback, and coaching. The Academy focuses on the first step. Follow-up sessions help extend the learning in a particular area, according to Weatherall-Jones, along with the district’s other professional development efforts.

The Saturday Academies are offered monthly from October through May at multiple district and local education sites. Some sessions that support teachers in using new technology, for example, are offered on the campus of a local community college with computer labs and classrooms that have LCD projectors.

Sessions are three hours, either from 8:30 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. or 12:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. Teachers are not limited in the number of sessions they can attend.

Teachers can see all the sessions available online and sign up via computer. The district maintains a database showing which sessions each

NSDC’S BELIEF

Every student learns when every educator engages in effective professional learning.

teacher has attended, a sort of professional development transcript, that allows for follow-up. Weatherall-Jones said the district then may contact teachers to suggest ways for them to continue their learning.

The sessions are taught by curriculum specialists in the content areas, some consultants when the content is highly specialized, and coaches and teacher leaders from within the district.

While the Academies currently do not provide continuing education credits, Weatherall-Jones said the district may consider that in the future.

Weatherall-Jones said individual schools in the district determine what professional learning teachers should focus their efforts on based on data analysis that then is incorporated in their School Improvement Plans. The schools’ plans, then, are reviewed and combined with data on student needs districtwide to determine what is offered in Saturday Academy.

“It’s based on teachers’ needs as they relate to the district’s strategic initiatives,” she said.

A strategic effort

More professional development had been site-based in the past, she said. While some schools had budgeted for specialized training, others had not. Some received professional development grants. Centralizing support and providing an alternative time for professional learning outside the work week were measures through which the district attempted to address that disparity, Weatherall-Jones said.

Schools continue to have five full days during the school year for individualized professional development that each determines is needed for that site. In addition, principals can use monthly after-school meeting time for professional learning specific to the school.

But Weatherall-Jones works with other content-area specialists in the district’s Department of Educational Services to plan to meet needs based on efficiency of scale, and all offerings are reviewed for how well they meet five strategic goals the district has set.

Centralizing some professional learning allows for that alignment, Weatherall-Jones said, and adds

- In 2005-06, the baseline year for Milwaukee Public Schools’ strategic plan, Working Together, Achieving More, **38%** of students in grades 3-8 and grade 10 were proficient or advanced on the state’s test in math.
- In 2008-09, **47%** were proficient or advanced, a **9%** increase.
- Improvements were noted in every grade tested in 2008-09, with the largest increase being **10%** at grade 8.

more accountability for high standards in professional development. She noted that the district has adopted NSDC's Standards for Staff Development, and all professional learning now must meet those standards.

"Because we had such decentralized professional development, now that everything has to be measured by the standards, we have to teach it as such in a centralized way," she said. "We don't want to hold teachers accountable for something that we don't provide support for; for example, teaching in longer blocks of time requires some professional development. Our goal is to improve teacher effectiveness."

The district's approach overall is to move from a site-based to outcome-based strategic management that centers on achieving districtwide goals and is aligned with core beliefs, the superintendent said in June 2009 at the district's "Hot Topics" event, an annual two-day session focused on professional development for staff. Andrekopoulos presented an overview of the district strategic plan, Working Together, Achieving More. Professional development is the focus of one of eight strategic goals in the plan.

The plan, adopted in 2007, calls for "leaders and staff (to) demonstrate continuous improvement through focused professional development." Weatherall-Jones said the district then developed the "big five" in professional development improvement goals, with professional learning built around emphases on data analysis; high-yield, research-based instructional strategies; an aligned curriculum; extended learning time; and differentiated instruction.

A positive response

The response to the academies has been positive and is growing, said Weatherall-Jones. The number of participants tripled in one month, from 586 in October to 1,513 in November. Nearly 140

Milwaukee Public Schools Milwaukee, Wisc.

Schools: 121 elementary schools, 12 middle schools, 49 high schools, 16 with combined grades

Enrollment: 82,444

Staff: 5,766

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	11.9%
Black:	56.6%
Hispanic:	22.6%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	4.8%
Native American:	0.8%
Other:	3.2%

Limited English proficient: 9.5%

Free/reduced lunch: 80.9%

Special education: 19.2%

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of the district's 198 schools were represented, with some sending a dozen or more teachers to the learning day.

Enhancing lessons through technology has been well received, along with sessions on differentiating reading instruction.

Both teachers who have new access to more professional learning and coordinators who want greater contact across the district are enthused about the Saturday Academies, Weatherall-Jones said.

"Teachers are excited," she said. "As the buzz is growing, teachers are saying, 'Ooh, can you offer this? Can you offer that?'"

Reference

Joyce, B. & Showers, B. (1980). Improving inservice training: The messages of research. *Educational Leadership*, 37(5), 379-385. ♦

DISTRICT'S BIG 5 OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

- Data analysis
- High-yield, research-based instructional strategies
- Aligned curriculum
- Extended learning time
- Differentiated instruction