# THE 3 R's OF LEARNING TIME

**RETHINK, RESHAPE, RECLAIM**

**By Shera Carter Sackey**

As a Learning School Alliance facilitator, I have had the opportunity to work with schools nationally and internationally, and one of the biggest challenges that school teams face is finding time for collaborative learning. The Learning School Alliance is a network of schools collaborating about professional practice. The network embodies Learning Forward's purpose to advance effective job-embedded professional learning that leads to student outcomes.

A key component of Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning is a focus on collaborative learning, typically in learning communities. These learning communities are committed to collective responsibility, goal alignment, and ongoing job-embedded professional learning. However, collaborative learning must be job-embedded and connected to teaching and learning (Killion & Roy, 2009). Traditionally, most professional development has taken place outside the school day or only during the summer, but many schools and districts are finding time inside the workweek for groups to use for data analysis, lesson study, and investigation of new instructional practices. Many schools also use technology resources such as wikis and e-learning platforms to communicate things that in the past might have been addressed in a faculty meet-

ing. With online communities of practice and other synchronous and asynchronous tools, there are many ways in which schools can plan effectively so that time (or lack of time) won't be a factor in how well professional learning communities function.

**CREATIVITY NEEDED**

Many schools find creative ways to embed time for learning into their school structures. Belinda Treadwell, principal of Mountain Brook Elementary School in Mountain Brook, Ala., says that her school is very intentional about providing common collaborative learning times for teachers. She believes that the master schedule is one of the most important tools that a principal has and providing teachers with structured time for professional learning is essential to increased outcomes and a high-performing culture of excellence.

How does Mountain Brook do it? The school sends instructional assistants into classrooms to relieve teachers while students participate in sustained silent reading time. During teachers' professional learning team time, they structure their work around the cycle of continuous improvement. They also use Innovation Configuration maps to make sure their collaborative learning time is driven by student needs. Treadwell believes that providing quality professional learning is the most important thing the school can do to impact student learning.

While the school has professional learning communities in place, implementing them was not without its challenges. Parents voiced concerns about the time that teachers were spending outside of the classroom. Therefore, educators at Mountain Brook make sure to remain transparent about their work to ensure buy-in from parents. Treadwell notes that the school uses Learning Forward's

Standards Assessment Inventory and Innovation Configuration maps to evaluate its professional learning growth as a team. "We are on a journey. We have a long way to go, but as our professional learning community grows, I grow as a principal," she says.

Paula Hoff, principal of Westwood Middle School in Blaine, Minn., shares Treadwell's priorities. She has ensured that teachers in her school have time to engage in collaborative learning. Collaborative learning teams are based on common content, common students, and common data. Each core academic team meets in two 25-minute sessions a week. She also ensures that faculty meetings are focused on professional learning. Teams have a continuous focus on data, including building data, grade-level data, department data, and individual teacher data. Her teams use Innovation Configuration maps to evaluate professional learning, measuring where they are compared to where they need to be.

Westwood uses the district's early release days for collaborative learning. Her school gauges the impact of collaboration time by using the Standards Assessment Inventory. Hoff says, "Our biggest challenge was not in receiving pushback, but in the struggles that some teachers

experienced." These challenges were due to the tension from having clearly defined desired results, examining the current reality, determining next steps, and continually revisiting their progress. Hoff helps alleviate the tension by "providing the balance between pressure and support for staff to meet the needs of our students," she says. The building leadership team continually asks for feedback from teachers to examine the impact and effectiveness of professional learning. "We are committed to the belief that professional development equates to professional change," Hoff says.

Many principals note the value in transitioning how meeting time is used. Mina Schnitta, principal of Hogg Middle School in Houston, Texas, makes sure that time is allotted for teachers to "work on the work" of effective teaching and learning during times reserved for traditional faculty meetings.

### SUPPORT FROM CENTRAL OFFICE

Leaders cannot implement change by themselves. They need support to implement and maintain it (Killion & Roy, 2009). The role of the central office is very important in assisting schools with planning and implementing change. And, although the central office role is paramount, schools are the "center of change" (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991, p. 203). Many of the principals I work with acknowledge that they receive a tremendous amount of support from their districts. Districts help their learning efforts by giving them the flexibility to create the schedule needed to promote collaborative learning. Most of the districts have provided the schools with early release time to focus on collaborative learning. Corey Steiner, principal of West Fargo High in West Fargo, N.D., says that the central office has funded a paraprofessional to staff the school's intervention room, which provides teachers with more time to collaborate. The school provides substitute teachers on a regular basis so that content-area teams can meet to work toward their goal of providing a viable curriculum with common assessments built in throughout the school year. Hoff at Westwood Middle School says the district offers a balance of pressure and support. "They provide principals with support and autonomy to create the type of schedule needed to support professional learning," she says.

To assist with facilitating professional learning communities, districts can use research-based practices to define professional development, develop networks of instructional experts, develop a support system for new teachers, strategically allocate financial resources, and encourage and assist schools in using data. These structural supports are key to fostering effective communities of practice. Hord (2004) writes that if the proper structures such as time are not put into place, professional learning communities and the ongoing work of collaboration will be ineffective. Treadwell at Mountain Brook says, "We have a very supportive central office. The superintendent's expectation is that principals adhere to Learning Forward's standards and grow professional learning communities within their schools."

### A STRUCTURE FOR POWERFUL PRACTICE

School-based learning communities have evolved over time and have the power to revolutionize teacher practice. Traditional forms of professional development are no longer the norm as professional learning community research has impacted the ways teachers learn. Hord (2004) suggests that professional learning communities are not "an improvement program or plan," yet they provides a structure for schools (p. 14) to use for learning experiences. She also writes that the implementation of professional learning communities will not be widespread if we don't shift our thinking about what the role of the teacher entails. Some stakeholders may hold the perception that the most effective use of the teachers' time is always working directly with students in class, while others are concerned about the effectiveness of such communities. However, an overwhelming body of research supports these communities of practice as a leading strategy for strengthening organizational outcomes. An important element of ensuring success for these communities is providing adequate time so educators can engage in collaborative learning frequently as part of their workdays. Maybe all schools will have to get creative with how they find time until the field catches up with our understanding that job-embedded learning is the strategy to push student learning forward.

### REFERENCES

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**Hord, S.M. (2004).** *Learning together, leading together: Changing schools through professional learning communities.* New York: Teachers College Press.

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**School's out. It's time to learn!**
By Karel Holloway
*Tools for Schools, April/May 2003, Vol. 6, No. 5*

This article outlines six steps to creating a summer professional learning program: Choose your planning team, look at the data, set goals, decide how to achieve them, determine funding and location, and plan follow-up. Included in the newsletter are four tools and a list of resources for planning a summer learning program.
www.learningforward.org/news/issueDetails.cfm?issueID=124