THE 3 R’s OF LEARNING TIME

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-
Ambassadors of learning: Teachers’ enthusiasm builds momentum for district’s long-running program
By Valerie von Frank
JSD, Spring 2009, Vol. 30, No. 2
A long-term commitment to job-embedded professional development creates a culture of continuous learning in one Michigan district. Every Wednesday, students’ day is shortened by two hours to make time for teachers’ professional development in Holt Public Schools. Many of the articles in this issue of JSD are devoted to time for professional learning.
www.learningforward.org/news/articleDetails.cfm?articleID=1833

Bargaining time: Union contract spells out how and when professional learning will happen
By Joan Richardson
The Learning System, March 2007, Vol. 2, No. 6
A district undergoes a cultural shift to more job-embedded, results-driven, and standards-based professional development. The new approach was made possible in large part because the teachers union and the district shifted to an interest-based bargaining model rather than the traditional adversarial model. The newsletter also includes a tool, “Strategies for finding time.”
www.learningforward.org/news/issueDetails.cfm?issueID=197

Becoming a Learning School
By Joellen Killion & Patricia Roy
NSDC, 2009
From setting the stage to engaging the community in understanding the purpose of collaborative professional learning teams, this book covers what leaders need to know to implement more effective professional learning. Chapter 5 focuses on scheduling time for both formal and informal learning opportunities. Included are 12 tools to guide schools and districts through the steps outlined in the chapter.
www.learningforwardstore.org/mm5/merchant.mvc?Session_ID=ea3d95e2be26d8a2e15b5d7446e7f441&Store_Code=The_Learning_Foward_Store&Screen=PROD&Product_Code=B423

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...
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.


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 provide 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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