

THE LEARNING System

EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

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Making time for Common Core implementation

By Anthony Armstrong

According to the most recent *MetLife Survey of the American Teacher* (2012), a “majority of principals (67%) and teachers (59%) believe that implementing the Common Core standards is very challenging or challenging for school leaders” (p. 54). For Jack Linton, assistant superintendent for Petal Schools (Miss.), the most important resource for effectively implementing Common Core standards is time for teacher learning communities.

TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE

Petal schools decided two years ago that their curriculum would focus on Common Core standards, and Linton knew that he needed to find time to support implementation of the standards. “You cannot expect teachers to be able to implement the standards without enough time,” said Linton.

In *Establishing Time for Professional Learning* (2013), a workbook designed to help districts and schools increase



collaborative learning time for educators, Joellen Killion makes it clear that deep and lasting transformations happen through learning. “Change is dependent on learning—acquisition of knowledge, skills, practices, procedures, and dispositions. This type of acquisition is not an instantaneous process. It requires building from awareness to expert use” (p. 7).

Killion calls for long-term investments in resources to support the learning process for initiatives such as implementing Common Core standards and, like Linton, states that time is the most important resource. “As decades of research in professional learning conclude, deep practice requires intensive, standards-based, collaborative professional learning, sometimes extending across multiple years, that incorporates opportunities to practice without risk, coaching with feedback, and ongoing learning to refine and extend executive control of new practices. Foremost among

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the investments needed, according to educators, is time” (p. 9).

ESTABLISH CLEAR UNDERSTANDINGS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TIME

For Linton, the biggest obstacles to finding time for effective professional learning were mistaken assumptions that money and time are absolute limitations. “Frequently, people will say they don’t have the schedule or funds to implement learning communities,” said Linton. “Schedules can be easily manipulated. Sometimes it is like we are married to our schedule. Research schedules. School leaders can change schedules to fit their needs, not put the schedule’s needs first.”

When Linton proposed his idea for creating learning communities in his school, his superintendent asked how much it would cost. “It won’t cost you anything,” replied Linton. “Just give me some latitude to change the structure of the way we do business at school.”

Once Linton gained the superintendent’s approval, he found a sizable challenge in getting buy-in from teachers. “Early in my career, we had traditional staff development workshops, but those were isolated and ineffective. When we introduced teacher learning communities, the teachers thought they were just something else they had to do. I got some push back early in the process, but once teachers

understood what we were doing, they took ownership of the process and turned it into a professional learning environment.”

To help generate teacher support, Linton made sure that professional learning time remained strictly professional growth time and was not used for other activities, such as class prep time or airing grievances. He ensured that the time was spent productively, such as discussing and modeling lessons, watching videos of practice, and sharing constructive critiques among colleagues.

“The professional learning communities are key and have given us a venue for implementing Common Core,” said Linton. “I don’t see how we could implement Common Core with fidelity without them because teachers need time to train and practice a new conceptual way of teaching.”

TEACHER LEADERSHIP IS ESSENTIAL

Currently, Petal’s principals and central office staff attend professional learning meetings with teachers as often

Teachers who are less satisfied with their jobs are more likely to be working in schools where time for professional development and collaboration have decreased in the last 12 months (MetLife, 2012, p. 12).

Learning Forward BELIEF

Successful leaders create and sustain a culture of learning.

Reduced budgets offer challenges

86% of teachers and **78%** of principals say managing the school budget and resources to meet school needs is challenging or very challenging for school leaders (MetLife, 2012, p.5).

Beyond reductions in staffing, programs, and services, six in ten teachers report that the average class size in their school has increased. One-third of teachers also indicate that educational technology and materials have not been kept up to date to meet student needs, while two in ten report that school facilities have not been kept in clean or good condition (MetLife, 2011, p. 5).

TIME FOR EQUITY

The percentage of **principals and teachers who feel their students are performing at or above grade level**, when viewed according to income levels, underscores the importance of equity in resource allocation.

Most of our students are performing at or above grade level.	In low-income schools	In high-income schools
Principals	37%	91%
Teachers	27%	83%

Source: MetLife, 2012, p. 7.

as possible throughout each week. Linton understands, though, that principals and superintendents do not have time to attend as many meetings as they would like. To ensure that the groups stay focused and constantly improving, Linton relies upon teacher leadership.

“The learning communities have been tremendous in contributing to the growth of our teachers as instructional leaders,” said Linton. “One of the components of professional learning for Common Core is teacher leadership. Ultimately, the principal cannot meet with the groups daily, so a strong teacher leader as facilitator keeps the group focused. That is crucial to any type of meeting. I learned quickly that if we didn’t have facilitators and protocols in place, productivity could stall within two weeks.”

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MAKE SCHEDULES WORK FOR YOU

When Linton was a principal, he started making time for professional learning by changing the school's seven-period modular schedule to a modified block schedule for his science classes. "We gave science teachers first period for collaboration time to work on common assessments and best practices. They had an additional planning period as well. Over the next three years, we incorporated all the core classes with professional learning communities. When I moved into the district office, we went districtwide, with the learning communities in all five schools. Now, we probably have 90% of our professional development in learning communities."

Originally, the collaborative block was split in half, with the first half of the period designated for professional learning communities and the second half set aside for personal planning time. "What we found over the years," said Linton, "is that those groups became so cohesive, and the collaborative time was so important to them, they ended up using the full block of time for their learning communities."

Linton also felt that teacher quality mattered more than class size, so he increased the school's class sizes to 24-26 students per class, which freed up more time for teachers to meet.

The learning communities for Petal schools are now part of the system's culture, from the top down, including learning communities for principals. The district starts each school year with a leadership academy for principals, where principals work on best practices, curriculum, and Common Core standards implementation. Principals continue their collaboration throughout the year through monthly, principal-led meetings in smaller groups. "These smaller groups visit schools across grade levels and conduct book talks and guided walk-throughs or instructional rounds similar to those you might see in the medical profession," explained Linton. "They make observations and talk about what they observed. We are trying to get all principals on the same page for what they are observing, so these learning communities for principals are a vital part of our system."

Common Core and expectations

While approximately **70%** of teachers believe implementation of Common Core will benefit students, far fewer are very confident Common Core implementation will improve student achievement (**17%**) and will better prepare students for college and the workforce (**20%**). However, confidence is higher for teachers who report that teachers in their schools are using Common Core a great deal (MetLife, 2012, pp. 67-68).

Learn more

2012 MetLife Teacher Survey

The current report along with reports in the entire series are available online.

www.metlife.com/teachersurvey

2012 MetLife Teacher Survey webinar

The Alliance for Excellent Education and panelists discuss the findings for policymakers and education leaders to note as they work to enable school leaders to meet increased expectations for educational outcomes.

<http://media.all4ed.org/webinar-mar-4-2013>

COMMIT AT ALL LEVELS

A final piece of advice Linton offers to those seeking more time for professional learning is to ensure that everyone is committed to the change at all levels. "Beware of those who want to hold on to what was done in the past. People often thought that we didn't need to change because we were a star school district, but commitment to learning communities and Common Core is good for kids and is what we need to be doing to grow professionally."

Resource allocation is an important equity strategy. *Meet the Promise of Content Standards: Investing in Professional Learning* (Killion & Hirsh, 2012) provides specific suggestions for the investments needed to implement Common Core standards, including advice for how to find time, how to ensure that time is spent efficiently and effectively, and what resources and support are needed to sustain those investments. Additionally, the report offers strategies to help states, systems, and schools work together to ensure that the varying needs of all children are met.

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