

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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Leadership standard calls for evidence of effectiveness

There are many ways to exert school system leadership, and one of the most powerful is to judiciously use the words “Stop” and “No.” Invoking these words at the right times, in the right ways, for the right purposes, is essential to improving professional learning.

School system leaders are always under pressure to say “Yes.” They are accountable to many entities: school boards, state education agencies and legislatures, and the federal government, not to mention local political and business leaders. Each of these entities has expectations or requirements that, in effect, drive leaders’ daily work. No wonder leaders’ agendas are often crowded with implementing, maintaining, or improving various procedures and practices that may or may not improve education. Some administrators are so busy they begin to believe their level of activity is a credible indicator of their professional effectiveness.

School systems and schools are more often victims rather than beneficiaries of more rules, programs, methodologies, and interventions. Because there are seldom effective evaluations of such activities, the focus and energies of educators frequently dissipate as the number of initiatives increase. Maintaining activities and piling on new ones can become the focus, rather than ensuring their impact.

In two important ways, this

phenomenon has implications for developing a standards-based system of professional learning. Over time, many school systems have instituted a variety of professional development practices that continue from year to year with little or no scrutiny. However, now that there are national standards for professional learning, school systems must objectively and rigorously analyze their professional development policies, programs, and practices. Which ones authentically align with the standards? Which ones do not? What is the evidence of their effectiveness?

The answers may provide a need for school system leaders to say “Stop.” That is, stop the practices that are clearly at odds with the standards. Such action is consistent with the Leadership standard that calls for leaders to “align policies and guidelines to ensure effective professional learning within their school systems or schools” (Learning Forward, 2011).

This alignment is an essential building block for leaders to establish, as the standards require, “organizational systems and structures that support effective professional learning and ongoing continuous improvement” (Learning Forward, 2011). As tempting as it may be for school system leaders to shave the square pegs of current practices so they fit in the round holes of the standards, that will not create the alignment necessary for professional learning that positively impacts the performance of educators.

Unfortunately, stopping practices that don’t align with the standards is

not the end of the challenge. School system leaders will continue to be subject to a barrage of proposals by policymakers, educators, and vendors who argue that their favored policy, program, or practice will increase professional learning’s effectiveness. Some of the proposals may have potential, many will not. School system leaders must devote the time and effort necessary to critically assess such proposals and determine whether and how they can contribute to a standards-based system of professional learning. It will take a great deal of intestinal fortitude to say “No,” particularly when a proposed approach seductively glitters with false promise, or comes from powerful political or commercial interests.

The professional learning standards do not require adding more policies, programs, and practices. Instead, they call for creating a new system of professional learning built on the standards and the research that supports them. School system leaders can only do that if they have the courage to say “Stop” or “No” when necessary to set professional learning on a new path.

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Hayes Mizell (hmizell@gmail.com) is distinguished senior fellow at Learning Forward. ●





Data, coaching programs improve Jeffco instructional practices

Our superintendent for Jeffco Public Schools (Colo.), Cindy Stevenson, has tremendous value for building teacher capacity through professional development. She demonstrates that belief through her actions and words.

The district began an instructional coaching model almost a decade ago based on our values and beliefs. Jeffco believes that the number one impact on student achievement is a highly effective teacher. To ensure highly effective teachers in all classrooms, teachers must have access to job-embedded professional learning that is focused on their particular needs based on their school and student data. Teachers trust teachers and respond more positively to non-evaluative coaching relationships, working side by side with peers whose focus is support. Coaches are there to co-teach, to co-plan, to analyze data, and to help teachers design lessons and effectively use data.

We now have full-time coaches in all 95 elementary schools and all 19 middle schools. We train our coaches to be data coaches, instructional and curriculum specialists, change agents, and school improvement specialists. Instructional coaching is the foundation of our districtwide professional learning.

SIDE-BY-SIDE LEARNING

We bring our instructional coaches in once a month for a full day of professional development. We also bring them in once a month to do

side-by-side learning with their principals. That professional development is structured based on district student achievement data and our district improvement plan. We look to the coaches and principals to then use that professional learning, along with their site school improvement plan, what their student achievement data are telling them, and what they know about their particular teachers, to tailor their site-based professional learning and to monitor teacher transfer of the learning into classroom practice. We use coaches' professional development as a trickle-down model, a way to align the learning occurring at all levels of the district.

Our coaching program is dynamic. One thing we have learned is that the coaching program has to continually adapt. We adjust our program every year based on district data, district goals, and feedback from teachers and principals. This year, we implemented student-centered coaching cycles in which coaches work with classroom teachers in four- to six-week cycles. They collect formative achievement data, set goals, plan lessons, and teach using a gradual release model. Finally, they collect summative achievement data to determine effectiveness and next steps. We also have tweaked the program to align the goals of the individual coach with the school's goals.

We use data to evaluate the program. An example is the principal leadership survey, in which principals at the elementary and middle level indicated that maintaining the

instructional coach program was their top priority, even in the face of budget cuts. In last year's teacher survey, more than 1,770 classroom teachers responded, and 80% found coaching effective and believed coaching has helped them improve their instructional practice as classroom teachers.

REACHING OUT FOR SUPPORT

As we look at teacher effectiveness measures and the implementation of the Common Core, we can't ask teachers to deal with that magnitude of change and to transform their practice in their classrooms and not give them the support they need. Will all of them take advantage of it? Absolutely not. But as more accountability measures are imposed on classroom teachers, you'll see more of them reaching out to their coaches for support.



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Priscilla Straughn (pstraugh@jeffco.k12.co.us) is executive director of educational research and design for Jeffco (Jefferson County, Colo.) Public Schools. ●

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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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Anthony Armstrong (anthony.armstrong@learningforward.org) is Learning Forward's publications editor. ●

Staff perceptions about collaborative time

Use this tool to conduct a quick check on staff perceptions about collaborative professional learning and work. The survey might be added to an online survey tool to make it easier to use and compile results. Gather responses from as many staff members as possible and compile the results and share mean scores with staff.

Where are we now?

1. Our school includes time during the contract day for teachers to learn and work together in teams whose members share common goals (school, grade level, department, etc.) for student learning.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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2. In our school, professional learning occurs primarily during the school day.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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3. In our school, teams of teachers have scheduled time several times per week for professional learning.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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4. Our principal uses staff meetings for professional learning.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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5. Teachers in our school are hesitant about asking for help from their peers.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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6. Teachers in our school use all available time for collaborative professional learning and work.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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7. In our school, teachers value individual planning time.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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8. Teachers in our school believe that collaborative professional learning and work improves their individual effectiveness.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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9. Teachers in our school prefer to plan individually rather than collaboratively.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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10. Teachers in our school are hesitant about asking for help from their peers.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
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11. The benefits I receive from having time for collaborative professional learning with my peers are:

12. The challenges I have with having time for collaborative professional learning and work with my peers are:

Use the questions below with the staff or a time study team to analyze the results.

1. What trends or patterns exist in the responses?
2. What surprises us?
3. Which will support our efforts to create additional time for collaborative professional learning?
4. Which are potential barriers to creating additional time for collaborative professional learning?
5. What do these results suggest we need to pay attention to as a school as we study time for professional learning?
6. If we were able to create more time for collaborative professional learning and work, how would we expect these results to change in a year or two?

Adapted from *Becoming a Learning School* by Joellen Killion & Pat Roy, Tool 5.1. Copyright 2009 by National Staff Development Council. Adapted with permission.



Get this and other tools for increasing and refining the use of time for educator collaboration in *Establishing Time for Professional Learning*. Available at www.learningforward.org/publications/implementing-common-core.

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BUSINESS OFFICE

504 S. Locust St.

Oxford OH 45056

513-523-6029

800-727-7288

Fax: 513-523-0638

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