

4 places to dig deep

TO FIND MORE TIME FOR TEACHER COLLABORATION

BY KRISTI KHORSHEED

The idea of teachers working together to improve teaching and learning seems so sensible that few would argue against it. So why don't schools provide regular and ample opportunities for teachers to collaborate on their practice?

Some schools are hampered by the limitations of union contracts and limited resources. However, the most basic problem is that many have difficulty finding new ways of using existing resources, such as time and personnel. When principals can envision a schedule with unequal time slots or music or physical education classes with fluid sizes, they can rearrange and reallocate limited resources to allow for new concepts of professional learning. For the last eight years, teachers at Garfield Elementary School in Livonia, Mich., have organized themselves into teams and have created time to work collaboratively.

"MAKING" TIME

The rationale for teacher collaboration has been stated in literature (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Darling-Hammond & Ifill-Lynch, 2006; Little, 1999), is promoted in NSDC's



Standards for Staff Development (2001), and is a common element of whole school reform programs. And the professional learning communities movement rests on the belief that collective effort is better than autonomous and isolated arrangements traditionally found in schools (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

In a study of five high-performing schools, Karen Hawley Miles and Linda Darling-Hammond (1997) concluded that “the biggest constraint (to restructuring schools) may be a limited vision of the changes in school organization that can create a more professional organization and improve student achievement” (p.42).

In 1998, the principal and staff at Garfield set out to find ways to use

their existing time and resources more creatively to allow teachers to maximize their professional learning through team meetings. First, teachers determined how much time teams needed to examine student work, analyze assessment data, and plan common lessons.

William Green, Garfield’s principal, said that teachers find 60 to 90 minutes of uninterrupted time works well.

That is long enough to accomplish critical tasks and still hold team members’ attention. In addition, he said, balancing teachers’ time with time away from students is important. Garfield’s teachers also found that this time needed to be in addition to regular teacher preparation periods.

At some elementary schools,

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teacher teams meet during a common 45-minute planning time to collaborate (Choy, Chen, & Bugarin, 2006). But when one considers that elementary teachers may spend a couple of minutes walking their classes to and from the special where students will go while the teachers meet, 45 minutes may be reduced to 35 — not enough time for substantive work. And teachers need those time slots for tasks such as planning, copying, grading, and assembling materials for their next lesson.

When teachers at Garfield meet, Green says, “it is not planning time. They are not making phone calls or running things off at the copy machine.” Setting aside regular time for collaborative professional learning requires thinking outside the box, he said.

Some schools schedule students to arrive late or leave early, but time for collaboration can be created without modifying the school day schedule. One benefit of working during the school day is that having students present allows teachers to engage in practice-based learning, such as peer observations or modeling. For teachers to work collaboratively, the focus must be on ongoing, targeted activities that involve engaging in practice with students and consulting with fellow teachers (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002). School leaders’ goal, therefore, should be to build 60 to 90 minutes for professional learning into teachers’ normal work day. At Garfield, teams accomplished the goal and allow teachers at least 90 minutes for professional learning every week by combining several strategies.

RETHINKING TIME, STAFF, AND STUDENT GROUPINGS

Use specials. For teachers to have 90 minutes during the school day, Michigan law requires that students be placed with another certified

Garfield Elementary School Livonia, Mich.

Grades: K-6

Enrollment: 454

Staff: 30

Racial/ethnic mix:

White: 65%

Black: 31%

Hispanic: 1%

Asian/Pacific Islander: 3%

Native American: 0%

Other: 0%

Limited English proficient: 6%

Languages spoken: Five to six

Free/reduced lunch: 31%

Special education: 10%

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staff member. Art, music, or physical education teachers’ schedules are valuable resources. Once special teachers have fulfilled their meeting time with each class, there may be another class time available in their schedules that principals traditionally might have used to assign these teachers other tasks or to allow a class an extra music period. Principals may consider additional staff members’ time, as well. By carefully reviewing the schedules of all personnel, principals may uncover opportunities to reorganize time.

Consider recess. Creatively shuffling, stretching, and pairing time slots can result in a longer time period that might have been buried in a school’s elaborate spreadsheet of teachers’ schedules. Most elementary students have recess periods. Coupling recess time with that extra art or music class time may create 60-plus minutes for a collaboration team if the same time is available for other members of a grade-level team.

Review funding sources. Title I schools may be able to rethink how they use their additional funds or per-

Organizing schools for professional learning: Traditional and reformed

Traditional weekly schedule	Reformed weekly schedule	How collaboration was arranged for four teachers at a time	Allocating teachers to cover classes during collaboration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers have five prep periods. Teachers work mostly alone. Collaboration occurs by chance or among friends. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers have one half-day for collaboration. Teachers have four prep periods. Collaboration occurs by design. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two half-time teachers teach two classes and two art, music, library, or physical education teachers teach two classes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use Title I funds, if available, to pay for two half-time teachers. Find one FTE in the teaching roster by balancing class sizes through multiage groupings. Make a case to the district for extra personnel. Use surplus special periods. Combine three classes into two for special periods. Use a prep period combined with recess or lunch.

sonnel to support student learning. One year, Garfield’s principal used Title I funds to hire two part-time teachers. The two managed two classes, providing additional literacy instruction and enabling two regular classroom teachers to collaborate. The part-time teachers provided this support for multiple classes throughout the week, supporting different teams of teachers and providing students with additional academic support.

Think about student grouping.

Principals can more efficiently group students if they rethink how to do so. For example, music and physical education classes do not have to be limited to the same number of students as the homeroom class. At Garfield, for example, three 1st-grade classes of 20 were reconfigured into two groups of 30 students for their music and gym periods, followed by a recess, without exceeding the contractual maximum. In this way, three classes were covered by two specialist teachers, and three classroom teachers were able to collaborate for at least an hour.

Although specialist teachers might resist this arrangement, principals and teachers must acknowledge the need for changes in work arrangements to make policies driven by the priority to improve teaching and learning in the

core academic areas.

Rethinking how specials, personnel, and Title I funds are used and how students are grouped may help principals create time for teachers to work collaboratively on improving instruction. Then, when adequate time has been carved out, the hard work begins. Like any educational resource, the value of time depends on how it is used.

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