Don't make time, *rethink* time

Experts weigh in with practical advice for educators

BY JEFNA M. COHEN

How do you overcome the challenges to finding time for meaningful professional learning? We asked seven experts in the field, and these practitioners offer powerful strategies for making better use of educator time.

An example from Illinois centers student data in school systems as an essential component of a school's overall commitment to learning. In-house teacher leaders in New York model effective teaching and learning for those newer to the profession through group shadowing experiences.

A Utah transformation of staff meetings into professional learning communities (PLCs) — also giving teachers more autonomy — is another compelling example. And two Florida authors detail ways video gives educators flexibility with their professional learning, empowering them to personalize for areas of need and interest and leading to high rates of teacher retention.

Here is the practical advice they share.

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Build professional learning around data

By Elizabeth Dampf

There is not automatically a direct relationship between the number of hours people spend in professional learning and instructional prowess. Teachers are active practitioners who are always learning on the job and, in fact, can only learn on the job because this is where application and adjustments happen.

We pine for more professional learning time when, realistically, we could have all the time in the world and still not get the results we want. As you contemplate how to drive innovation, think carefully about the systems you need to build, rather than the time you need to spend.

Professional learning is most valuable when it provides a space for collaborative reflection, planning, and analysis, with current student learning data at the center. Imagine a team meeting or convening that starts with a piece of recent student learning data, arranged by grade, school, or even teacher.

The facilitator asks, "What professional learning activities should we do during our time together to improve these student outcomes?" That makes the conversation feel immediately relevant, and even urgent, to everyone involved. The message is: We will improve student outcomes, and teachers feel, I have a say in this, as well as a responsibility to participate.

But data on their own don't make change. You need to contextualize the student data as the direct responsibility of all staff. Only a professional culture in which staff see the data as their direct responsibility, no matter what, will yield a focus on collective adult learning.

Systems are also a key piece. Systems — ongoing processes embedded into our daily practices — bind the elements of professional learning together and blend them into teaching and learning. They incorporate research, experimentation, analysis, reflection, coaching, data, and school improvement goals, making a continuous loop of the things teachers and leaders do every day and using this loop as the driver of professional growth.

Data and systems should then become part of your school's overall commitment to learning and improvement, which may include walk-throughs, instructional coaching, and enacting improvement plans. The data and systems bring all those things together around the same goals and enable professional learning that is within teachers' day-to-day tasks.

Not only does this mitigate the logistical challenges of finding time for professional learning, but it also reframes how teachers see professional learning as an ongoing process centered on students' and teachers' needs.

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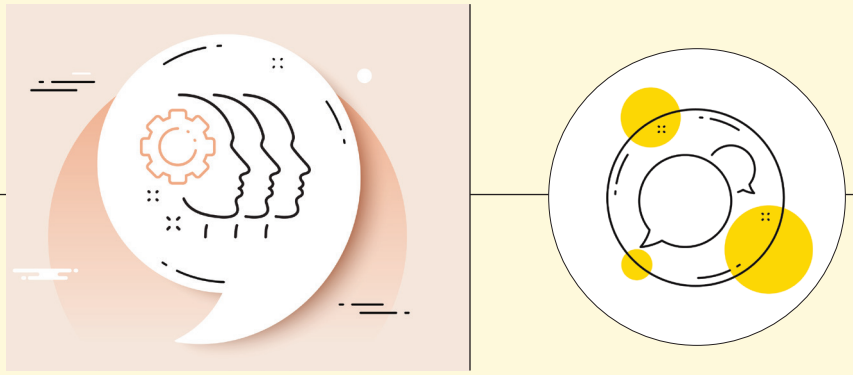

Encourage job shadowing

By Elizabeth Simons and Marguerite Dimgba

Job-embedded shadowing experiences are positive ways for an organization to grow and nurture staff, and shadow days are always very popular with our new teachers, mentor teachers, and teacher leaders. The teacher being shadowed reports spending extra time and care in the lesson planning, and the observing teacher often reports the experience as being transformative.

Finding substitute coverage for shadow day opportunities was challenging until we shifted our thinking and switched to a group shadowing experience. Rather than one teacher observing a master teacher, a small group of new teachers and a mentor teacher joined to participate in the shadow experience.

Our shadow days begin with a planning and look-for time, when educators decide if they'll be paying attention to classroom design, standards or curriculum implementation, or instructional techniques. The bulk of the day involves classroom observations, and the end of the day concludes with time to reflect and set individual goals.

Shadow days are ongoing, job-embedded, and responsive to teacher needs. Because they are offered within the school day and as a part of a teacher's active practice, they can help build a strong system of professional learning. Before observing, the new teacher may review particular elements of their instruction with a mentor, instructional coach, or administrator, and then self-select an area for focus.

We provide each participant with the description, steps, checklist, and reflection questions on how to effectively conduct a shadow day, from the book *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning* (Easton, 2015) and several note-catching tools. A new teacher may benefit from this practice once or even twice throughout the school year.

The teachers find shadow days valuable, and the students in the visited classes reported that the small group of teachers observing did not negatively disrupt instruction. We continue to grow this work, and, as we do, our professional learning staff is modeling lifelong learning.

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Rethink staff meetings

By Nathan Justis and Laura Reina

Near the end of the 2020-21 school year, the leadership team at the Edith Bowen Laboratory School recognized a need for teacher professional learning after analyzing student proficiencies. Understanding that each teacher's growth areas were different, we embarked on a great experiment to create separate learning teams for teachers of math, science, early literacy, and writing.

Originally, we planned to assign learning teams based on our perceptions of teachers' needs. But after reading about the importance of teacher autonomy (e.g., Patton et al., 2013), we let teachers choose their learning team, even making it optional to join one at all. An advantage to participating, however, was that it would meet a requirement within teachers' individual development plans. For administrators, it was a paradigm shift that required increased trust in teachers.

This decision also required a lot of logistical planning to reduce the number of whole-staff meetings to make space for learning teams. The school has early dismissal on Fridays that provides two to three hours for staff meetings and teacher preparation. Several years ago, we realized those afternoons were consumed by administrative tasks and school procedures, which caused disinterest and exhaustion among teachers before adult learning could begin.

The summer before our great experiment, administrators mapped out a schedule for the school year to share with teachers. We noted that it was a work in progress, subject to adjustments. Having a clear plan underscores the priority we place on learning teams, instills confidence in teachers, and shows respect for their time.

We then allocated two Fridays a month to learning teams with the hope that teachers would use the time to learn alongside their colleagues in meaningful ways. Weekly emails covered necessary business items, calendaring, and procedural matters, effectively freeing up Friday time slots for learning.

Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022) capture what we aspire to achieve with our school's professional learning. Some specific points strongly resonate with our recent work, including creating a culture of collaborative inquiry through engaging in continuous improvement and leveraging professional expertise through sustaining coherence and alignment. As our teachers have worked to align their practices, we have found that their professional expertise has grown.

At the end of the first year of this experiment, we asked teachers to reflect on this approach. In interviews, educators spoke about empowerment and ownership of their learning and the value of working toward meeting students' specific needs. One teacher compared this process to past professional learning, saying, "It builds investment because we choose whatever content we want to focus on. People are interested and engaged. It's different from top-down."

Not only has trust increased between teachers, but also mutually between administrators and teachers, too. One teacher said, "We are in control of our own learning as we collaborate and learn from each other. This is a powerful model to address challenges we face as educators. It's so different from traditional professional development — it's not one more thing we have to do."

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Leverage video

By Carmen Marroquin and Casey Swift

At Florida Virtual School, the retention rate among our teachers has stayed consistently above 88% over the past three years, even increasing to 93.2% for the 2022-23 school year. We believe this is because our teachers have the time, flexibility, and autonomy to choose their professional learning.

We know that time is a precious commodity, so we provide structures where teachers have the resources and the time to choose what they will learn and how they will monitor its impact on students. We offer different avenues for educator learning at a time that is convenient.

These include asynchronous video sessions, live synchronous learning during work hours, short videos about a topic like time management, and flipped lessons where our teachers spend time preparing before the professional learning session. The flipped model allows them to come to the session with integration ideas or questions they might need clarification on, giving them more time to collaborate with their peers or have in-depth conversations.

Since we are a virtual school, teachers can plan their days to attend sessions over videoconferencing or watch recorded video sessions on their own time. This flexibility in schedule creates an environment of engagement because teachers who join the sessions want to be there. They also receive credit toward certification.

Video learning has been successful in districts across the United States (Sablić et al., 2021). Professional learning facilitators can record their sessions and add the video to their self-paced library using professional learning software. Teachers who excel at using the strategy or tool could prepare a recording to share with their colleagues. This would be a great way to highlight what teachers in the district are doing without having to schedule live visits and arrange substitute coverage. Educators can then watch on their own time, allowing teachers to asynchronously collaborate and learn from one another.

After every professional learning session, we ask teachers to fill out a survey about their experience and tell us what topics they are interested in. This feedback makes it easier for us to plan future learning around their needs and wants.

As a result of these efforts, teachers feel supported and respected. In 2021, 83% of our teachers reported that they had the resources to empower themselves to help their students. Choices in learning, flexibility of time, and adequate resources all contribute to a culture that shows respect for the work while also encouraging teacher agency.

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