

## RESTRUCTURING TIME FOR COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

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Chapter 2: TIME: *The Resource a School Can Manage To Create More Effective Instruction. Corwin Press and Learning Forward*

*Things do not happen. Things are made to happen.*

John F. Kennedy

*Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.*

Arthur Ashe

There is hope. There are many districts around the country that have tackled this persistent issue of how we use time within the school day to support student and educator learning. There are also resolute principals working with intrepid teachers teams who have carved out and rearranged their current schedule to accommodate student-free time for teachers to work together to find ways to improve their students' learning and achievement.

Educators, from across the country, have made changes. Their experiences will be helpful to spur your thinking or jump-start your creativity. Probably no single idea will be an ideal match to your situation, but their experiences will hopefully provide encouragement and resolve to get started.

There are six generic ways that schools and districts have rescheduled time to support collaborative learning. They include 1) banking time, 2) buying time, 3) reorganizing the schedule, 4) reconfiguring teachers' instructional time, 5) using existing time more effectively, and 6) utilize resource staff or specialists. Each of these broad categories will be explained and examples provided. When possible, additional resources about the strategy will be provided.

1. **Banking time.** Most states identify the minimum amount of minutes required for a school day. Schools can “bank” time by beginning school earlier or releasing students

five to 10 minutes later each day. These minutes are accumulated and transformed into blocks of time for teachers to work together. These minutes can be added up to provide teachers with two hours at the end or beginning of the day once a week to work together. The time could be used for early release days or late start days. They could be bundled, for example, to create one full day once a month for team learning time.

- The Papillion-La Vista Public Schools in Nebraska took on the challenge of making time for learning teams to work together on a consistent basis. Working together the board of education, the administrators, building principals, and the teachers association discussed, debated, and decided on strategies to build this time into their schedule. The school district added 10 minutes to each school day to reserve six days in the schedule that teachers could work together without student contact. These six days were used for full day professional learning. Parents preferred this option because the days extended existing breaks or weekends, and caregivers could plan ahead ways to take care of their children. This option also didn't involve additional costs. The change was also acceptable within the teacher contract.
- Pioneering the idea of banking time, Iowa City Community School District worked with parents to create an early release schedule so that teachers could work collaboratively with each other to benefit students. In Iowa City, students are released one hour early on Thursdays leaving between 2:00 p.m. and 2:20 p.m. That hour is combined with the time teachers are required to stay after school until 4:00 p.m. providing between one hour 40 minutes to two hours weekly. The time is divided between building-focused concerns and district-based issues. Because the teaching staff worked directly with parents, the schedule has been integrated into the system as the way they do business in Iowa City.
- In Carman-Ainsworth Community Schools in Flint, Michigan, every Wednesday morning, students begin school an hour later so that teachers can meet and learn with colleagues. The district serves 5,400 students and before this change,

professional learning was a typical smorgasbord of activities not necessarily aligned to student needs. Teachers also began their Wednesday 15 minutes earlier than usual leading to a 75-minute block of learning time once a week. This new schedule did not change the time within the day for personal planning time.

- At Brandon High School in Ortonville, Michigan, every Wednesday morning was devoted to professional learning for staff. The teachers' day begins at 7:30 a.m.; students don't report until 11:00 a. m. Students can use this time for clubs, extra-curricular activities, and access to the computer lab and the school library.
- Other resources with information about banking time

Huffman, S. (Spring 1999). Deposits and withdrawals. *Journal of Staff Development*, 20(2), 37-41.

Pardini, P. (Spring 1999). Making time for adult learning. *Journal of Staff Development*, 20(2), 37-41.

Richardson, J. (March 2007). Bargaining time. *The Learning System*, 2(6), 6-7.

Vilaubi, L. (Spring 1999). Fridays for 90 minutes. *Journal of Staff Development*, 20(2), 37-41.

Davis, T. (Spring 1999). Innovative morning. *Journal of Staff Development*, 20(2), 37-41.

- 2. Buying Time.** Bringing on additional staff positions can provide collaborative time for the teaching staff. For example, one district had instructional aides monitor the classroom during a sustained silent reading time. While this is important time for students, it does not require certified personnel to serve as monitors. Buying time could also include hiring more clerks or support staff to expand or add planning and learning time for instructional staff. Substitutes can be brought in to relieve instructional staff so that they can plan together or observe each other and give constructive feedback. A substitute teacher might rotate every two hours from one classroom to another to free up the teachers to analyze student data or create common assessments. A bank of substitute teachers could be created that teachers could access to participate in various forms of professional learning.

- Maine-Endwell Central School District in Endwell, N.Y. describes a strategy they called roll-through which involved using just a few substitute teachers in a day while not significantly disrupting classroom instruction. A roll-through brings a specific group of staff together to study and learn about a specific identified topic. Enough substitutes are hired to cover one grade level or department. Substitute teachers take over the classrooms for one to two hours while teachers engage in professional learning. The substitutes then “roll” to another set of classrooms so that another grade level of content area can also participate in small group learning. These brief sessions are supplemented later with discussions, modeling, guided practice, and questions. An entire building can be covered in one or two days depending on size. Teachers are also asked to predict how much time they would need to learn and practice using new techniques in the classroom before another round of sessions are provided. The district found that it cost less to provide substitutes than it would be to provide stipends for teachers for the equivalent non-school time.
- At Madison Park School in Phoenix, AZ, they hired two fulltime substitute teachers to provide released time for teachers. Teachers sign up for one of the permanent substitutes expressly for engaging in professional learning. That professional learning could involve working with another teacher or working with one of the building’s master teachers. Teachers can access these substitutes two to three times a month.
- Each school in Montgomery County, Maryland has an allocation for a staff development substitute teacher. This teacher is only available to assist staff participate in professional development. For example, a teacher might request an afternoon to observe another teacher and debrief the experience. These substitutes are considered highly knowledgeable and skilled and are paid at a higher rate than a regular substitute teacher. Substitutes for illness or personal days are provided through a districtwide substitute pool.
- Other resources with information about buying time

Sever, K. and Bowgren, L. (Spring 2007). Shaping the workday. *Journal of Staff Development*, 28(2), 20-23.

Richardson, J. (August/September 2002). Districts that have found time. *Tools for Schools*, 6(1), 4-6.

Von Frank, V. (2008). *Finding time for professional learning*. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.

3. **Reorganizing the schedule.** Many typical schedules have already established common planning time for grade level or content area staff members to work and plan together. Usually this time is established for teachers who teach the same set of students such as in a middle school structure or for teachers who work in the same department or content area.
  - At Deer Park Elementary School in Owensboro, KY, they use special learning periods called *Connect* to provide time for teachers to work together. *Connect* periods involve students in a combination of physical education, music, library, Spanish, and computer instruction. *Connect* periods last 50 minutes. Grade level teachers use that 50 minutes for job-embedded professional learning and collaboration. Students also have opportunities to participate in a special district and university programs where students engage in art discovery and Chinese. This special time is also used by teachers for additional planning and collaboration.
  - At Liberty Middle School in Madison, Alabama, a block schedule provides time not only for intensive student learning but also collaborative, job-embedded professional learning. Each day, core-class teachers use three 94-minute blocks for instruction and have one additional 94-minute block for planning and collaboration. Elective teachers have six 45-minute periods each day and have two additional 45-minute periods for planning and collaboration. The weekly schedule focuses collaboration on analysis of data, professional learning, pupil-support team meetings, planning for parent meetings, and ongoing peer collaboration.

- Robbinsdale Cooper High School in Robbinsdale, Minnesota uses an eight-period schedule to provide time for teachers to collaborate on instruction. Cooper High School is an International Baccalaureate World school site. Students attend seven classes and a lunch period. Teachers are responsible for five periods of instruction and also have one preparation period, one duty period, and one lunch period. 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade instructors in the academic core area: English, math, science and social studies, have traded their duty period for time to meet daily in professional learning teams.
- Other resources with information about reorganizing the schedule:

Richardson, J. (August/September 2002). Districts that have found time.  
*Tools for Schools, 6(1)*, 4-6.

Killion, J. and Roy, P. (2009). *Becoming a learning school: Tool 5.6*. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.

National Center on Time and Learning [www.timeandlearning.org](http://www.timeandlearning.org)

This site contains extensive information about schools that have added up to 300 additional hours of instruction and provided time for staff to work and plan collaboratively.

4. **Reconfiguring teachers' instructional time.** There are many possibilities for covering teachers' instructional time. For example, building or district administrators could take over a class and teach for an hour or two. This strategy not only assists the teacher but also places a qualified, certified educator in the classroom. If the district has ties to college interns, they can teach a class on a regular schedule supplemented with pre-planning support from the regular teacher. Team teaching allows one instructor time to plan independently while the other teaches the whole class. Day-long, off-site field experiences, using parent volunteers and outside experts, can be used to create large blocks of time when teachers can learn together.
  - In Livonia, Michigan, Garfield Elementary School rethought student groupings. Three 1st grade classes of 20 students were reconfigured for their music and gym periods into two groups of 30 students. This allowed two specialists to cover

three classrooms and allow three classroom teachers to collaborate for at least an hour.

- Madison, Wisconsin's Lincoln Elementary school thought creatively about how to provide special science field trips that free up teachers to work together. With grant money, they hired an outstanding retired teacher to lead students through a standards-based science field trip to the school forest. While students were learning authentically outside of school, learning teams met with instructional resource teachers to examine student work, rethink curriculum implementation, and redesign classrooms. This time came to be called Spitzer days after that extraordinary teacher, Mr. Spitzer!
- At Spring Woods High School in Houston, Texas, student rally days meant a special schedule during the football season. This same schedule was adapted and used 15-20 times a year to create "staff rally" days. Teachers gain time to work together because students are dismissed 30 minutes early. Teachers work together using that 30 minutes coupled with time until the end of the normal work day. The 125 faculty members are divided into a dozen interdisciplinary teams and use their rally day to collaboratively plan and learn together.
- Other resources with information about reconfiguring teachers' instructional time:

Khorsheed, K. (Spring 2007). 4 places to dig deep to find more time for teacher collaboration. *Journal of Staff Development*, 28(2), 43-45.

Antonovich, J., Jones, K. and Hoffman, D. (February 2012). Eye on the prize. *Journal of Staff Development*, 33(1), 42-45.

Richardson, J. (August/September 2002). Districts that have found time. *Tools for Schools*, 6(1), 4-6.

Cushman, K. (1995). Using time well: Schedules in Essential Schools.

Horace. <http://archive.essentialschools.org/resources/11.html>

- 5. Using existing time more effectively.** One of the suggested activities that schools or districts undertake in preparation for addressing and rescheduling time for professional

learning is to do an inventory of how time is currently used and determine whether that time is well spent. It does not take long for educators to determine that time devoted to faculty meetings could be much more valuable if it was dedicated to collaborative staff learning. Districts have also recognized that instead of using four or five days within the school calendar for full day professional learning, that same time could be distributed across the school year to provide more frequent and shorter school-based learning opportunities.

- Mike Murphy, a former elementary school principal in Texas, found that faculty meetings became the butt of many faculty jokes. Faculty meetings had become a wasteland and became an opportunity to build staff skills as well as building trust and collegiality among staff members. He turned his faculty meetings into mini-professional development sessions in which the entire faculty read, discussed, analyzed, and planned together.
- Maine-Endwell Central School District in New York transformed their usual systemwide professional development days into school-based collaborative team time. Systemwide staff development days were usually either motivational speakers or generic workshop lead by outside experts. The alternative strategy involved having lead teachers and teacher trainers facilitate small group meetings who had created targeted goals for their work. That work time engaged staff in modeling new practices, coaching each other, co-teaching, and reflective sharing. Opportunities to observe peers occurred. Later, these observations were followed up with guided conversations to analyze what had been seen and set learning goals for their future instruction. Curricular-based teams analyzed common writing assessment data, restructured and realigned curriculum, and shared best practices.
- Wells Junior High School in Wells, Maine knew that they needed to find time for staff to do departmental planning. The obvious answer was to use their Wednesday faculty meeting time. Wells Junior High is organized using a middle school team concept. There was time in the schedule for teams to meet and



plan, but no time set aside for all the content area teachers to meet together. The school principal and staff decided to renovate their faculty meeting schedule. Once a month the faculty focuses on schoolwide issues and decisions. On another Wednesday, the school's building leadership teams meet together with the school administration. On the third Wednesday, departments meet to work on curriculum, teaching in a block schedule, and portfolio assessment. The fourth Wednesday is dedicated to either the building leadership team or departments—depending on current needs.

- Other resources with information about using existing time more efficiently:

Rodman, J. (Spring 1999). Meet me on Wednesday. *Journal of Staff Development, 20(2)*, 37-41.

Richardson, J. (October/November 1999). Harness the potential of staff meetings. *Tools for Schools, 2(2)*, 1-8.

Easton, L.B. (February/March 2009). Protocols: A facilitator's best friend. *Tools for Schools, 12(3)*, 1-7. *This newsletter provides additional ideas about structured, timed learning activities and discussions that can be held during faculty meetings.*

6. **Utilize resource staff or specialists:** Rethinking the typical schedule, school administrators have found that creating a block of time for resource or specialists to work with a group of students, frees up grade level teams to work and learn together. This time might also be found by using volunteers, special area teachers, and other staff to provide enrichment activities or electives for students.

- In Chicago, Hefferan Elementary School created an intensive learning schedule that includes four days of focused instruction each week. Once a week, one group of students engages in Resource Day. Resource Day involves student engagement in art, music, physical education, library, and computer lab work. Their classroom teachers still report to school but have time to work together for four hours on ways to improve instruction. Resource Day begins with a block of

time focused on reading instruction. At 10:30 a.m., pupils move to their special area classes, join their teachers for lunch, and then participate in more special area work in the afternoon. Two grade levels are scheduled to have Resource Day each day of the week.

- In Homewood City, Alabama’s Edgewood Elementary School principal and staff reworked their schedule to provide all teachers with four 50-minute blocks of time each week. While the new schedule seems complicated, it has worked for a number of years. Teachers work on instructional technology as well as literacy and other activities such as grade level planning. Students participate in music, exploratory Spanish, and art once a week. A class called *Variety* is also in the mix. *Variety* involves rotating visits with the school nurse, media specialist, counselor or special guests. (The Killion and Roy citation below provides an example of their schedule for 5<sup>th</sup> grade as well as the music teacher.)
- Goldsmith-Schiffman Elementary School worked with their physical education teachers to build a schedule that allows teachers time to analyze and learn from Response to Intervention data. The physical education teachers agreed to work with a larger group of students on Friday for 45 minutes, an extended period of time. This time allows one set of grade level teachers to meet and collaborate with each other. The overall schedule also allows teachers to meet for shorter amounts of time to participate in book study, writing common assessments, and planning lessons.
- Other resources with information about utilizing resource or specialists:
  - Hirsh, S. (October 1997). Investing the time to learn. *Results*, 3.
  - Little, D. (Spring 1999). I have happy teachers. *Journal of Staff Development*, 20(2), 37-41
  - Killion, J. and Roy, P. (2009). *Becoming a learning school: Tool 5.6*. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.
  - Killion, J. (2013). *Establishing time for professional learning*. Oxford, OH:

Learning Forward. [www.learningforward.org/docs/default-source/commoncore/establishing-time-for-professional-learning.pdf](http://www.learningforward.org/docs/default-source/commoncore/establishing-time-for-professional-learning.pdf)