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## Harness the potential of staff meetings

By Joan Richardson

**A**lmost any teacher or principal would agree that faculty meetings are one of the most dreaded and ineffective parts of the work week.

“Faculty meetings are a wasteland. Teachers make jokes about them. They laugh about how bad they are,” says Mike Murphy, NSDC’s director of programs and a former elementary school principal in Texas.

But Murphy also acknowledges that staff meetings represent “a chunk of time that is begging to be used in a productive way.”

Independent consultant Pam Robbins agrees. “More and more principals are finding themselves asking where they can find time in the traditional day to develop the skills within teachers to help them meet rigorous demands for student accountability.”

That has led an increasing number of principals to seize the opportunity to transform staff meetings into mini-staff development sessions in which the entire staff reads, discusses, analyzes, and plans together.

In schools where time is a precious and limited commodity, using staff meetings more effectively can be a way to “find time” for staff development. In many school districts, teacher contracts already recognize that teachers are obligated to attend staff meetings on a regular basis.

“I don’t discount the importance of staff meet-

ings. I think they can be very valuable. But we’ve kind of dumbed them down. We’ve used them as a 45-minute memo,” Murphy says.

Instead, staff meetings can be used as tools for building a learning community among a school’s staff. “Staff meetings are an opportunity to built unity and community. They’re perfect times to physically connect with everyone on the staff to make sure that there is coherence and continuity,” Murphy says.

### WHERE TO START

Principals who want to make this change must first determine how to disseminate information that traditionally has been shared in staff meetings.

Murphy says he designated a bulletin board in his elementary school where he posted information that needed to be shared with the staff. Carole Schmidt, a former high school principal, says she delegated to department chairs the responsibility of ensuring that certain kinds of information reached teachers. (See Page 3 for more ideas for alternatives to meetings.)

As a principal begins to shift from a traditional staff meeting to a staff development meeting, Robbins also recommends that the learning portion of the meeting comes first. Quoting Kent Peterson, she says, “what you pay attention to communicates what you value.”

*Continued on Page 2*

*Staff Meetings*

# Harness the potential of staff meetings

*Continued from Page One*

## STAFF READINESS

Before changing the staff meeting, Robbins says principals must examine the working relationships among the staff. If a staff is not used to working together, she recommends introducing the idea slowly. “You’ll doom your collaborative effort to failure if you use a high-risk activity with a group that’s not ready for it,” Robbins says.

When she thinks about schools, Robbins divides them into three categories, depending on their readiness and familiarity with collaboration.

**Schools with little collaboration:** In these schools, the staff rarely interacts professionally with each other.

For these schools, Robbins recommends “low-risk” staff development meetings initially. For example, the principal can invite staff members to a “swap meet” in which teachers exchange books, articles, and classroom materials.

“This gets them used to sharing stuff, even though it’s physical stuff. No one has to put their professional skill and knowledge on the line for scrutiny,” she says.

A notch above is a jigsaw reading. (See tool on Page 4.) For staffs who are unaccustomed to talking together, this will give them an opportunity to read a similar article and have a substantive conversation about it. Such a discussion also begins the process of recognizing the expertise that already exists in the staff, she said.

“Collegiality must be based on congeniality and this begins to develop a basic comfort level with one another,” she says.

**Schools with moderate collaboration:** Teachers in these schools may already have done some classroom visits and observations.

For such schools, Robbins often recommends an activity she calls “Mail Call.” (See tool on Page 5.) In this activ-

ity, teachers can privately identify problems and receive suggestions from colleagues about how to address the issues. Because it’s done privately, teachers are less likely to feel embarrassed about seeking help.

Robbins says such an activity, however, begins to demonstrate to teachers that their colleagues have a great deal of expertise. “They can leave the room with 15, 20, 25 ideas about how to deal with something. It creates an understanding that, if only I reach out to my colleague, perhaps the answer to my problems exists three to four doorways away,” she says.

**Schools with high collaboration:** In these schools, teachers already are accustomed to working with each other — through peer coaching and team teaching, for example.

For those schools, Robbins recommends introducing them to techniques for examining student work. (See tool on Page 6.) Again, she cautions that not all staffs are ready for an activity like this. “Teachers might get a little nervous. This can be very threatening because other teachers are dissecting the actual work that their students are doing and that’s a reflection on their teaching,” she says.

A preliminary step might involve having teachers discuss work done by students in other schools. “This way, they learn the strategy and no one teaching in your school feels like they’ve been put on the chopping block,” she says.

## SETTING THE AGENDA

To make staff meetings meaningful to teachers, Murphy recommends entrusting teachers with the responsibility for selecting the content in relation to student learning goals.

Then, the principal needs to assume responsibility for planning staff meetings. “Treat the meetings the way you would any formal learning experience. Apply the

same standards you would apply to any quality professional development,” Murphy says.

During one year at his school, for example, teachers decided to they wanted to devote staff meeting time to discipline issues. During a series of faculty meetings, teachers read articles and watched videos of simulations and real-life situations of different discipline issues. Murphy led discussions about what they read and saw. Over time, they generated ideas of what would work in their school.

“Faculty meetings became meetings that people were eager to attend,” he says.

As a high school principal, Carol Schmidt did something similar. During her first year as principal, she listened to teachers’ concerns about the scattershot efforts at improvement. “What they wanted was a common focus. We were killing people with all of the committees that we had,” she says.

Schmidt decided that the entire staff would spend its four staff development half days plus staff meeting time during the next year rewriting the school’s mission, vision, and establishing learning goals. She also moved from weekly staff meetings to quarterly staff meetings. “Any time we had the faculty together, we focused on learning goals for the school,” she says.

“We changed the meeting so it wasn’t just a meeting to get together. It was a meeting designed for their learning and for mine,” she says.

Murphy says pulling a staff together to focus on a single theme over a long period helps build a sense of community among the staff. “Teachers have been very isolated from each other. Faculties don’t just naturally come together. But they’re expected to work on common goals and common needs. They can’t do that until schools find ways to bring people together,” he says.

# Alternatives to staff meetings

## DEPARTMENTAL/GRADE-LEVEL MEETINGS

**Advantage:** Extends opportunities for leadership.

**Disadvantage:** Another meeting gets labeled as being “unproductive.” Not all teachers hear the same message in the same way.

## ROUND-ROBIN MEMOS\*

**Advantage:** Easy to do.

**Disadvantage:** May take a long time for the information to reach everyone who needs to see it. Some individuals may not take responsibility for moving the memo along to the next person on the list.

\* Write a memo with the information that needs to be shared. At the top, list the names of everyone who needs to see it. Each person on the list passes the memo on to the next person on the list. Make sure your name is last so the memo comes back to you.

## ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION

**Advantage:** Easy way to quickly share a brief amount of information with a variety of people.

**Disadvantage:** Some may not take the message as seriously. Individuals overloaded with e-mail may overlook.

## NEWSLETTERS/WEEKLY BULLETINS

**Advantage:** Gets information out to a large audience. Presentation of information allows principal to emphasize the importance of various issues.

**Disadvantage:** The time involved in producing newsletter will delay the delivery of the message.

## BROWN BAG LUNCHES

**Advantage:** Voluntary.

**Disadvantage:** Some may object to giving up their lunch time in favor of something that feels like work.

## BULLETIN BOARD MESSAGES IN HIGH TRAFFIC AREAS

**Advantage:** Easy to do. Almost anyone can contribute. Feels less bureaucratic.

**Disadvantage:** Difficult to determine if information has been seen by all who need it. Not appropriate way to share all information.

## INFORMAL CONVERSATION / HALL TALK

**Advantage:** Happens more naturally. Requires no planning.

**Disadvantage:** Some individuals could be overlooked. Message may not be taken as seriously.

## ONE-TO-ONE CONVERSATIONS

**Advantage:** Heightens the listener’s sense of importance.

**Disadvantage:** Time consuming. Message may not be consistent from conversation to conversation.

## COPIES OF MINUTES/LETTERS/REPORTS

**Advantage:** Easy — just copy and distribute with a note.

**Disadvantage:** If done too often, such mailings could develop a reputation as junk mail and go directly into the circular file.

## TELEPHONE CALLS

**Advantage:** Good way to gauge the reaction as individuals hear the information you have to share.

**Disadvantage:** Time consuming. Repetitive if you must give the same information to a number of people.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARIES

**Advantage:** Time saver for recipient.

**Disadvantage:** Difficult to determine who’s read it and how they’ve reacted. Takes more time to summarize effectively than to distribute minutes or copy articles.

*Every organization must find ways to share information with large groups of employees. But staff meetings are not the only way to do this. Consider which of these ideas you could try this month in your school. Some ideas are more appropriate for particular types of information.*

*Sources: Adapted from **Keys to Successful Meetings** by Stephanie Hirsh, Ann Delehant, and Sherry Sparks and **Mining Group Gold** by Thomas Kayser.*

# Jigsaw reading

*Just as potters cannot teach others to craft in clay without setting their own hands to work at the wheel, so teachers cannot fully teach others the excitement, the difficulty, the patience, and the satisfaction that accompany learning without themselves engaging in the messy, frustrating, and rewarding 'clay' of learning."*

—Roland Barth,

**Improving Schools from Within**

**COMMENTS TO THE FACILITATOR:** A jigsaw provides a good way for staff members to learn new content and also provides an opportunity for staff members to teach each other what they have learned.

**TIME:** One hour.

**SUPPLIES:** Several articles or selections from books which would be helpful in a school improvement effort.

**PREPARATION:** Make sufficient copies of the articles for each participant.

**NOTE:** Although individuals will only be reading one article, the principal should provide copies of each article for all staff members. Encourage them to collect the material in a folder or notebook for future review.

## Directions

1. Provide three to five articles or longer articles that have been broken down into three to five sections.
2. Divide the school staff into the same number of small groups, trying to have three to five persons in each group.
3. Have each member of the small groups silently read a different topic.  
Time: 10 minutes.
4. Create new small groups from the individuals who have read the same material. Allow them time to discuss what they have read. Time: 20 minutes.
5. Recreate the original small groups. Have each person teach the rest of the group about his or her reading. Time: 30 minutes.
6. Conclude with the question: What are the implications of this for our school?

# Mail call

**COMMENTS TO THE FACILITATOR:** This activity encourages staff members to recognize the knowledge and wisdom of their colleagues.

**TIME:** One hour.

**SUPPLIES:** Large mailing envelopes, stack of blank index cards, pens of the same color.

## Directions

1. At the beginning of a staff meeting, give each teacher one of the large mailing envelopes, a stack of blank index cards, and a pen.
2. On the outside of the envelope, ask each teacher to describe a problem he or she is facing in class. Teachers should not sign the envelopes.
3. The principal should collect the envelopes and randomly distribute them among the staff, ensuring that no teacher receives his or her own envelope.
4. Each teacher should read the problem on each envelope. As they consider the problem, they should write their ideas about solving the problem on one of the blank index cards. One idea per card. Each completed card should be placed inside the envelope. Teachers should not sign the cards.
5. As one teacher completes his or her response, he or she passes the envelope to the next teacher. This continues until every teacher has had an opportunity to respond to every problem.
6. At the end of the meeting, each teacher should retrieve his or her own envelope.

*Source: Pam Robbins, independent consultant.*

*The purpose of staff  
development is not just to  
implement isolated  
instructional innovation; its  
central purpose is to build  
strong collaborative work  
cultures that will develop the  
long-term capacity for change."*

— Michael Fullan

# Examining student work

*“Looking closely together at student work can unveil a treasure trove of insights to guide school communities as they reflect on their purpose, assess their progress, and plan strategies for reaching all children better.”*

— Horace, the publication of the Coalition of Essential Schools

**COMMENTS TO THE FACILITATOR:** This activity is for a staff that already works well together and has experienced some peer coaching or team teaching. For this activity to be truly successful, rotate the teachers who provide the student work.

**TIME:** One hour.

**SUPPLIES:** Either prepare sets of local and state standards for each group or post them in the room where they can easily be seen by everyone.

**PREPARATION:** Identify several teachers ahead of time who are willing to bring in three examples of student work — one each of low quality, medium quality, and high quality — and to talk about the lessons they taught. The names of the students should not be revealed. Make enough copies of the finished work to share with each person in the small groups.

## Directions

1. Divide the staff into small groups, ensuring a mix of disciplines or grade levels in each group.
2. The teacher who is providing the student work should briefly describe the lesson that was taught.
3. Each small group identifies the state or local standards that align with the assignment.
4. Each small group constructs a scoring guide specifically for this assignment. Using the numbers 1-4, the teachers should identify the qualities of an ideal piece of work, a high-quality piece, a medium-quality piece, and a low-quality product.
5. Distribute the student work. Provide time for teachers to examine and consider the students' work.
6. Ask teachers to describe — but not evaluate — the work they have seen.
7. Ask teachers to analyze the work and place it on the 1-4 scale.
8. Ask teachers to continue their discussion with some of the following questions:
  - Was the initial assignment clear?
  - What could be done to teach the concept or skill more effectively?
  - Was the lesson and assignment appropriately challenging for these students?
  - What would your next step be if you had taught this lesson and this assignment had been turned in to you?

# Learning ways to expand professional learning

■ “Building Professional Community in Schools,” by Sharon Kruse, Karen Seashore Louis, and Anthony Bryk, *Issues in Restructuring Schools, Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools*, Issue No. 6, Spring 1994. Reviews critical elements of a healthy school culture. Available online at [www.wcer.wisc.edu/completed/cors/issues\\_in\\_restructuring\\_schools/ISSUES\\_NO\\_6\\_SPRING\\_1994.pdf](http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/completed/cors/issues_in_restructuring_schools/ISSUES_NO_6_SPRING_1994.pdf)

■ *Examining student work*. Two web sites offer more information about how to develop a process for examining student work.

The Annenberg Institute web site covers principles, preparation, collection, and examination and provides extensive resources from many school reform and teaching organizations. A page also includes facilitation tips for examining student work.

- [www.aisr.brown.edu/html/lsw/home.html](http://www.aisr.brown.edu/html/lsw/home.html)
- [www.aisr.brown.edu/html/lsw/facilitation.html](http://www.aisr.brown.edu/html/lsw/facilitation.html)

The Atlas Communities web site offers a toolkit for “learning from student work” and a tuning protocol developed by the Coalition for Essential Schools.

- [www.edc.org/FSC/ATLAS/toolkit/learn.html](http://www.edc.org/FSC/ATLAS/toolkit/learn.html)
- [www.edc.org/FSC/ATLAS/toolkit/tuning.html](http://www.edc.org/FSC/ATLAS/toolkit/tuning.html)

■ “Good Seeds Grow in Strong Cultures,” by Jon Saphier and Mathew King, *Educational Leadership*, March 1985. Identifies the 12 norms of a healthy school culture. Check your local library for a copy.

■ *Improving Schools from Within* by Roland S. Barth. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1990.) Argues that collegiality, communication, and risk taking among adults in a school can foster an atmosphere for learning and leadership for all. To order, phone (800) 956-7739, fax (800) 569-0443, or online at [www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com).

■ *Making a Difference: Job-Embedded Staff Development* by Pam Robbins. (Oxford, Ohio: NSDC, 1998.) Explores the concept of job-embedded staff development by examining its rationale and relationship to building a collaborative workplace focused on learning. A two-cassette audiotape. NSDC stock #8040-H09. Price: \$20 non-members; \$16, members. To order, phone (513) 523-6029 or visit NSDC’s Online Bookstore at [www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm](http://www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm).

■ *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* by Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker. (Bloomington, Ind.: National Education Service, 1998.) Brings together the research and practical examples of how professional learning communities can lead to improved student learning. Price: \$24.95. To order, phone (800) 733-6786 or fax (812) 336-7790.

■ *The Principal as Staff Developer* by Richard DuFour. (Bloomington, Ind.: National Education Service, 1991.) Explores all aspects of the principal’s staff development responsibility, from creating a vision to implementing successful improvement programs. NSDC stock # B9. Price: \$16.95 non-members; \$13.56, members. To order, phone (513) 523-6029 or visit NSDC’s Online Bookstore at [www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm](http://www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm).

■ *Whole-Faculty Study Groups: A Powerful Way to Change Schools and Enhance Learning*, by Carlene U. Murphy and Dale W. Lick. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 1998.) Offers practical guidance needed to start, lead, and maintain faculty study groups. NSDC stock # B64. Price: \$37, non-members; \$29.60, members. To order, phone (513) 523-6029 or visit NSDC’s Online Bookstore at [www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm](http://www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm).

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# Improve your school through learning

## Ask Dr. Developer



**Dr. Developer has all the answers to questions that staff developers ask. (At least he thinks he does!)**

**Q** *I'm the principal of an elementary school and every teacher in my building grumbles about our weekly faculty meetings. They want me to cut back to two meetings a month. But if I don't have these meetings, I never get to see all of my staff at one time. Most of them leave right after school is over, except on days when we have staff meetings. What suggestions do you have?*

**A** Teachers are probably complaining about staff meetings because they see them as a waste of time. If you can use your staff meetings more productively, my hunch is that teachers will see value in them and not only stop complaining but begin to treasure them.

Do you really want to spend more time with your teachers or do you want to spend more time with them in a meaningful way? Adding staff development time to faculty meetings would create a way for everyone to benefit.

Since your staff is not used to working together, you probably want to start off slowly. Teachers need to get used to

the idea of talking with each other. Consider gradually adding these new elements to your staff meetings.

- Devote your first staff meeting each year to having teachers share what they have learned during their summer staff development experiences.

- Ask teachers who attend workshops during the school year to plan to spend no more than 10 minutes describing what they learned.

- If a large number of teachers attend a single conference or workshop, turn over the staff meeting to them and let them teach about what they learned.

- Bring in an outside speaker, perhaps a curriculum specialist from your district or your regional service agency.

- Identify an article or a book that your staff can read together. Make a copy available for each teacher and provide them with questions to consider as they read it.

Your teachers need and deserve time to work with each other and to learn from each other. You may also need to find time within your own day to do a little of your own learning.

To steal a phrase, remember that the staff that learns together, improves a school together.

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