

Finding Time to Educate Teachers

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For about two years the Rochester City School District has eliminated much of the teachers' mandatory staff development time. In years past students would be released almost an hour early once a week to create time for staff development. Due to such issues as low test scores, numerous retirements, and many newly adopted reform programs the city school district felt it was necessary to create additional time for staff development. Unfortunately, much of the time set aside for in-services was monopolized by school reform programs such as America's Choice. America's Choice is a prepackaged program that can take several years to implement. Since America's Choice is a very expensive investment for the district the city often makes the training a priority. Administrators and leadership teams are given time sensitive goals that they are expected to meet and are directly held accountable for by the programs coaches. The accountability leads to a stressed leadership team which then leads to a stressful professional development session. Administrators cram several new initiatives into one meeting, and the staff is left with their head spinning. Since the meetings are only once a week for typically an hour the opportunities to introduce new information is limited and often wasted. Teachers are exhausted after a long day with the children and are still trying to catch up with the information presented at last week's staff meeting. Teachers have little input into what goes on at staff development because it is all being driven by

the reform program. Staff often feels detached from the meeting because they have little or no say in what is being presented. Administration wishes that they could meet five times a week after school in order to address all the new programs and issues. The leadership team is able to witness the teachers' frustrations but feels pressured into meeting deadlines and delivering prescribed workshops. As an administrator what do you do? How do you make sure that your staff is growing professionally? How do you find time during the week to meet both teacher and central office needs? How can you work around contractual restrictions? All of these questions and more make staff development an important but often difficult issue to deal with successfully.

During the 1980's staff development was seen as a key aspect of school improvement. Although many educators were not initially excited about the prospect of in-services, studies have indicated that in order for school programs and practices to improve staff must be properly trained (Woods & Klein, 1987). This paper looks at the importance of effective staff development and the models proven to be most useful. During the 1970's and 1980's a list of effective practices were created. No matter what approach your school takes to staff development the following items are essential for productive meetings (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Kells, 1980; Lawrence, 1974; Yarger, Howey, & Joyce, 1980). The items are as follows:

- Programs conducted in school settings and addressing school improvement efforts;
- Teachers have an active role in the planning of staff development activities;
- Variety of training opportunities, emphasizing self instruction;
- Teachers actively choose goals and activities;
- Training that continues over time and allows for follow up training and additional

support.

Now that we are aware of the essential items necessary for a successful in-service, how do we find the time to have one? The following models provide different ways of going about offering professional development. Some models are commonly used and some are creative ways of working around contractual restrictions and time constraints.

Some of the traditional models are Banked Time or Extended Day. The Banked Time model is when schools add time to their professional day, and rather than spending the additional time with students the districts banks the time and puts it toward professional development hours. For example, one school in Illinois banked 20 minutes a day which lead to nine full school improvement days. Another traditional option is Extended Day which usually involves adding time to the end of the day. When comparing both models the extended model is the most commonly used locally. Although a popular approach, many teachers find it hard to focus after a long day with the children. Teachers are exhausted which impacts their ability to retain and completely understand a new concept. Another reason Extended Day is often unsuccessful is because the teachers' personal obligations can conflict with the extended day schedule which leads to an inefficient and incomplete plan rollout.

Another model some districts use is the Extended Calendar option. This model can consist of either summer training, or depending on your school district, intersession training. Summer training, if funding is possible, gives staff an opportunity to meet prior to the beginning of the school year to discuss and plan for future initiatives. It is always beneficial to meet in the beginning of the school year because teachers can get a firm grasp on a new instructional approach before they need to implement it into their

classroom. It is also easier for teachers to start a new plan with students at the start of the new school year rather than after a teacher has established guidelines and rituals. Staff seems more willing to give a new plan a chance if they aren't forced into changing their current techniques mid-year. One difficulty with a summer schedule is the funding. Another is working around the staff's vacation schedule. If implemented correctly you as an administrator and your staff can hit the ground running once the year begins. The intersession model is for those school districts that attend school year round and have extended breaks multiple times a year.

The models listed above require more money to pay teachers for time they can not work into their building's schedule. The next few professional development models were created out of necessity when dealing with small budgets and strict contracts. One such model that can accommodate these tight budgets is called Community Days. Very often, during the course of a typical school year, a building will have numerous outside agencies express interest in meeting with students and sharing information about their organization. Rather than having these groups come on separate occasions for 30 to 45 minutes at a time invite them to come all at once. This would lead to a day where the students have activities planned, and the teachers are more or less facilitating. This would allow for teachers to possibly be released during a portion of the community day. This is a creative way of giving teachers an in-service that does not involve them staying after school.

Another creative model deals with utilizing the teachers' break schedule. The Common Planning Period model gives teachers at the same grade level common back to back specials and lunch. This would free up time for grade levels to voluntarily

collaborate during their planning time. This option lends itself nicely to either formal or informal idea sharing or instructional support.

Another possibility for administrators to consider is utilizing the technology within their own building. Offer staff on-line opportunities for professional development. This model has several benefits such as flexible scheduling, more of an opportunity to share concerns and ideas electronically as well as request content specific training. Another benefit to online training is the continuous ability to get and give support. Follow up workshops are often very difficult to schedule and new initiatives often fall to side without proper support. Online training offers continuous support and the ability to give and receive constant feedback.

During the last few years my current building has utilized a business partnership that has been established for many years. Each grade level, four times a year, is released for a day. As a grade level team we meet at our business partner's offices and use their conference room. During this time we receive full day training in addition to invaluable time to collaborate and share ideas as a team. The staff finds this time beneficial because it gets them out of the building and their minds focused on training. Normally, when you are in school and receiving training you can't help but think about your students. When you are away it allows you to have a clearer focus.

Once you find that time for professional development is very important that you are providing high-quality training. Your goals for your in-services should be clear and focused on school improvement issues. Professional development opportunities must be planned and involve staff input. Simply overwhelming staff with several new initiatives without support or proper training is just wasted time. Whenever possible teachers

should be provided with options that will allow them to benefit the most from their professional development opportunities. As an administrator your professional development should be well planned and take into consideration follow-up training and additional support after the initial meeting. Administrators should utilize their shared planning team when deciding on professional development. By utilizing the planning team you are receiving input from multiple constituencies regarding necessary training topics. In conjunction with input from the shared planning team administrators should use data to help drive their professional development decisions. Finally, it is the building leader's responsibility to model the desired techniques and strategies introduced at the workshops. During a time of change your staff will look for leadership and direction, and it is the administrator's job to supply that support and leadership.

References:

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