



Make Time for Collaboration

“You will never “find” time for anything. If you want time, you must make it.”

-Charles Bruxton

The consensus is clear: One of the critical conditions for the development of collaborative cultures is *designated and protected time* for teachers to meet and collaborate during the regular school day. As Raywid says, “Collaborative time for teachers to undertake and sustain school improvement may be more important than equipment, facilities, or even staff development.”

Principals often ask, “How will we find the time to collaborate?” The answer is that we won’t *find* the time. The reality is that we already *have* the time, and if principals want more time for teachers to collaborate, they must *make* time by changing the daily schedule and routine of their school.

Long ago, principals acknowledged that there is never enough time to do everything we want to accomplish, but as Kruse observed, “Principals forge the conditions that give rise to the growth of professional learning communities in schools.” Principals can create more collaborative cultures by changing the structure of the day and by making collaboration a priority. Watts and Castle have identified five strategies principals can use to make more time for collaboration:

1. Free up time

Creating more time for teachers to collaborate can be accomplished by “freeing up” some of the teachers’ time spent on routine duties. The existing daily schedule does not change; instead, teachers are temporarily relieved from regular duties to collaborate on special projects or at designated times during the school year. To accomplish this, another teacher, administrator, instructional aide or even a volunteer covers a teacher’s classroom.

The benefit of this strategy is that it does not disrupt the existing routines of a school. The disadvantages, however, are that this approach is typically only a temporary solution and is not systematic or school-wide. Freeing up time in this manner does little to ensure a long-term commitment to creating a more collaborative culture in a school.

2. Purchase time

A second strategy for making time available is simply to purchase more time for collaboration. Schools often release teachers through substitutes or pay for summer writing projects. Some schools have found success by paying teachers to attend Saturday work sessions. One caution is that this approach removes teachers from the classroom and, universally, teachers feel guilty about being away from their students.

Further, while some teachers welcome an opportunity to work together in the summer or on a Saturday, many others have busy personal schedules and other commitments that conflict with Saturday or summer work schedules.

In these tough economic times, purchasing time can be a fiscal challenge, but purchasing time for collaboration can work so long as there are funds to support the practice. This strategy is often used for ad hoc committees, one-time events or specific projects, but it does not promote long-term solutions to the challenge of providing more time for collaboration.

3. Restructure or reschedule time

It can be complicated to reschedule or restructure time, but doing so yields lasting changes that are more comprehensive and systematic. Common strategies for this approach involve banking time or scheduling late arrival or early release days that alter the traditional calendar, school day and/or teaching schedule.

Restructured or rescheduled time has some obvious advantages over purchasing time, but there are problems nonetheless. The disadvantage of this approach is that students are typically not on campus or in session during the restructured or rescheduled time, which conflicts with community expectations that students be in school. Thus, creating time for teachers to work together while students are not on campus creates a public relations problem for the building principal. Communicating with the community about the rationale for such a change is an additional burden that must be considered when using this time-making strategy.

4. Make better use of existing time

In an effort to identify ways to better use time, some schools are conducting time studies and asking teachers to track how they use the time that already exists in their school day. For example, making better use of time allows faculty meetings to shift from forums for long and exhausting verbal memos to more opportunities for real and reflective collaboration among teachers. As teachers move through the various stages of PLC implementation, the use of time shifts. Teachers find they need *less* time learning about the work and *more* time working on the work.

This approach to making more time for collaboration can have a lasting impact on the culture of a school. As teachers examine the current reality of the way time is used, they confront a host of issues related to



the school's mission, vision, values, and goals. How time is used in school says a lot about a school's purpose and priorities.

5. Schedule common planning time

Common planning time is designated and protected time for teachers to work with their colleagues. The idea of planning time is not new, but the creation of common planning time typically requires changes to the daily schedule. Schools can arrange schedules in three ways: according to tradition (adult centered), to facilitate instruction (teaching centered), or to facilitate collaboration (learning centered). The question for principals is "Why is the schedule the way it is?"

In some schools, the schedule has not changed in years. Further examination may show that unchanging schedules are based on unspoken norms such as the most senior teacher gets the last hour free or the teacher with the longest morning commute always has first period open in case he or she encounters traffic delays. These schedules are organized around adult convenience and almost never generate more time for collaboration.

Likewise, schedules can be arranged in ways that facilitate the delivery of instruction. For example, an art teacher may demand that all the first-grade classrooms be scheduled consecutively or that PE classes be scheduled back-to-back so the equipment and materials do not have to be exchanged between periods. A schedule organized in this way places a high priority on the logistics of teaching and does little to promote more time for meaningful collaboration.

Alternately, a schedule may be designed such that all teachers from the same class, course, or grade level are available to meet at the same time. Common planning time, as a strategy to create more time for teachers, works best when teachers from the same grade level or department meet with the clear intention to use the planning time for collaboration. In these schools, time for collaboration – in direct support of student learning – is the most important consideration when building a schedule.

Nearly 30 years ago Schlechty observed, "The one commodity teachers and administrators say they do not have enough of, even more than money, is time: time to teach, time to converse, time to think, time to plan, time to talk, even time to go to the restroom or have a cup of coffee. Time is indeed precious in school." Schlechty (1990) In a professional learning community, a teacher's role shifts from working in isolation to working in collaboration with others. As a teacher's role changes, so must the way the teacher uses time.

There is no closet in which schools store extra time or secret desk drawer holding a stash of reflective moments. Simply put, because we are never going to *find* more time, if we want to ensure that teachers work in teams we have to *make* time for collaboration. ■

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