

Forget Faculty **MEETINGS**



...FOCUS on Professional Learning

Jared Wastler

When a survey showed only a 50% satisfaction rate with professional development offerings, a school stepped back to review how time was used.

Instead of sitting in faculty meetings, teachers use the time for meaningful collaborative learning.

Giving teachers autonomy respects their abilities and their time.

Effective professional learning is a fundamental component of promoting student achievement and establishing effective schools. Yet how many times are educators asked to sit in a professional workshop where their engagement is limited and, after it is over, they are no better as educators than they were before? Whitaker and Breaux (2013) said that “one of the most important goals of every faculty meeting should be for all teachers to walk out more excited about teaching and more effective tomorrow than they were today” (p. 1). Is that the reality? Most US teachers have said that much of the professional development that is available to them is not useful and that they have limited influence in essential areas of school decision making (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009).

It is paramount that educators are prepared for the challenges they will face. Implementation of Common Core State Standards, new teacher evaluation instruments, student learning objectives, and personalized learning environments have created a climate of constant change. School leaders have an obligation to help their teachers face those changes and so must reflect on the nature of their professional learning programs to ensure that they are autonomous, relevant, and collaborative in nature.

Liberty High School in Eldersburg, MD, has restructured its entire professional learning program to meet the needs of every instructional staff member. The journey has been a two-year process but has resulted in increased student achievement, staff engagement, and collaborative opportunities.

Reflecting and Retooling

The first step in the restructuring process began with a look at the current state of professional learning within the building. Staff members were asked to provide feedback on Liberty’s professional learning program. In 2011, 52% of staff members identified themselves as satisfied with the current professional learning model. The written responses that the administrators received indicated that many staff members viewed the professional learning program as outdated, irrelevant, and not individualized. It was clear that the professional learning model was designed for ease of execution, rather than for authentic and autonomous professional learning for staff members.

Professional Learning at Liberty High School

Vision

Promote student growth by providing staff with opportunities to grow professionally, collaborate globally, and be owners of their professional learning.

Goals

- Respect professionalism
- Promote collaboration
- Foster creativity
- Utilize technology to connect
- Always be better

Expectations

Instructional Staff Members

- Take ownership of professional learning
- Be willing to experiment and take risks
- Communicate
- Engage and connect

Administration

- Provide support
- Be willing to accept failure and risk
- Communicate
- Be honest and open
- Engage and connect

Over the next two years, staff members and administrators redesigned Liberty's professional learning program so that it provides engaging, relevant, and collaborative avenues for professional learning. This required the development of a vision for professional learning, professional learning goals and expectations, and creative opportunities for professional learning. Not only have changes been made to existing programs but also new opportunities for growth have been developed.

Eliminating Faculty Meetings

The reflection on our faculty meetings began with a simple conversation. Faculty meetings at Liberty were like those in many schools: an hour a month and filled with announcements, policies, new initiatives, and quick-hit presentations. One day a teacher leader in our building asked a simple question: "Why is it if I miss the hour-long meet-

Videos of instructional practice spur discussion among team members.



ing on Monday I can make it up in three minutes Tuesday morning?" The answer was simple: the meetings were an hour because they had to be an hour. Meetings were inefficient and unnecessary. We needed a change.

In 2012, we started reducing the number of whole-school faculty meetings. Meetings were restructured to include time for staff members to share and discuss transdisciplinary aspects of Common Core or to have time as departments to collaborate on instruction. By the end of 2012, 78% of staff members expressed their satisfaction with the current professional learning model. Conversations with staff members had become more collaborative and instructionally focused. Evaluation conferences often referenced conversations and collaborations from department meetings. The feedback was so positive that in 2013 we eliminated faculty meetings from Liberty's professional learning model, which left the question of how to use that time to benefit staff members professionally. We decided to adjust Liberty's professional learning model by focusing on collaboration and autonomy.

Promoting Collaboration and Autonomy

One of our primary goals was to develop a professional learning program that promoted and emphasized collaboration among staff members.

Using the contractual time vacated by faculty meetings, several collaborative formats were instituted into the professional learning model.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

In lieu of the hour requirement for faculty meetings, staff members are now all actively engaged in professional learning communities (PLCs) within the school. Those PLCs have been developed on the basis of faculty members' feedback and needs. The groups meet monthly to collaborate and discuss topics that relate to their PLCs and to find new ways to incorporate elements of the PLCs into their classrooms.

TEN-MINUTE TUESDAYS

One of the issues we encountered when eliminating faculty meetings was how to continually share best practices on a schoolwide level. The solution was inspired by *The Ten-Minute Inservice* by Todd Whitaker and Annette Breaux. Driven by their concept that many best practices can be shared, reviewed, and discussed in 10 minutes, we developed a series of professional learning opportunities for sharing best practices within our building.

Twice a month, staff members gather during contractual time at the end of the student day to learn about a tool, a practice, or an initiative. Sessions are offered in response to a staff recommendation or request. The sessions are completely voluntary, yet half the staff takes part regularly. Sessions this year have focused on Edmodo, BrainPop, Discovery Education, and English-math transdisciplinary lessons. Ten-Minute Tuesdays let us provide relevant and timely professional learning for staff members in a variety of sessions that meet the needs of the staff.

GOOGLE HANGOUTS

Technology has made professional connection and collaboration a global phenomenon rather than a geographic one. At Liberty, we use Google Hangouts so that staff members can benefit from the knowledge of some of education's brightest minds. For example, last summer we launched a pilot for flipped classroom instruction. Because no one within the building had any experience with

this instructional model, we needed to find outside support. Rather than send our pilot teachers to a conference, we brought Todd Nesloney, an experienced flipped classroom teacher, into the school by having our teachers participate in a Hangout. He shared his experiences with our pilot teachers and answered their questions.

Ten years ago, such training would have been cumbersome, expensive, and tedious. Today it is as easy as a tweet, an e-mail, and a click on the screen. This year, Liberty teachers have connected with teachers in Iowa and Arkansas to discuss the Common Core and are working on developing collaborative meetings for PLCs.

FEDEX DAY

In March 2013, we found ourselves with an afternoon of available professional learning and a plateful of needs. Many of those needs were the specific needs of a small group of staff members. Rather than offer a one-size-fits-all approach, we decided to hold our first FedEx Day, which is based on a concept we first learned of in Daniel Pink's *Drive* (2009, Penguin). The concept started with businesses offering employees an entire day to work on projects they chose. The only requirement was that they must share their project outcomes with the group at the end of the day—hence, a “FedEx Day”—teams must *deliver* their products to their colleagues.

At Liberty, an afternoon was set aside to experiment with this learning model. The administrators gathered the staff members and gave them two simple instructions:

- You must work on something that benefits student learning and achievement
- You must share your project at the end of the day.

Two rules—that's it! Staff members broke off into collaborative teams and tackled issues that were the most pressing or intriguing to them. Teams worked on developing a direct instructional program for special education students, integrating infographics into classroom assessment, promoting internships and career connections, identifying transdisciplinary opportunities between science and English, and facilitating study skills lessons in the advisory program.

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Liberty High School

ELDERSBURG, MD

GRADES:

9–12

ENROLLMENT:

1,060

COMMUNITY:

Rural

DEMOGRAPHICS:

90.9% White, 2.6% Black, 2.4% Asian, 4.1% other

ADMINISTRATIVE TEAM:

1 principal, 2 assistant principals, 1 academic facilitator



Faculty members focus on their project during FedEx Day.



Since the inception of Liberty's current professional learning model, staff satisfaction related to the professional learning plan has increased to 99%.

FedEx Day had such a positive impact on the staff and the school that this year it will be a full-day activity and plans are in the works to add a student FedEx Day in the spring. For more information on Liberty's FedEx Day, visit <http://blogs.carrollk12.org/libertyhs180/march-4-pd>.

Where Liberty Is Going From Here

I am proud to say that this year, Liberty's school mantra is "Create, innovate, and inspire." This also holds true with its professional learning model. Administrators are actively working with staff members to continue to reflect and retool the professional learning model to meet their needs and to increase opportunities for student and staff leadership.

Since the inception of Liberty's current professional learning model, staff satisfaction related to the professional learning plan has increased to 99%. Many staff members are taking on leadership roles not only in their own professional learning but also at a building-wide level. Students have also become an active part of our professional learning model. Last spring, Liberty students collaborated with student leaders from Smithfield (RI) High School to plan, facilitate, and evaluate a professional learning session for faculty members. This year, we are actively working to grow this program to find additional opportunities for students and staff members to collaborate to support professional learning. Going forward, we are beginning the process of developing massive open online courses (MOOCs), iTunes courses, and on-

line professional networks to continue to develop Liberty's professional learning program to support all staff members.

Conclusion

Professional learning is an oft-overlooked component of effective schools. Administrators owe it to students and staff members to provide opportunities for reflection, collaboration, and autonomous growth. In the end, professional learning should in itself be a model of solid instructional practice.

Over the last two years, Liberty has been able to develop its model of professional learning by modeling and incorporating relevant and autonomous pedagogy into our professional learning opportunities. The result has been a collaborative and engaging professional learning program where the professional educator is the focus and shepherd of the staff development process. **PL**

REFERENCES

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