

## Finding Time for Collaboration

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**Many schools throughout the country are experimenting with creative ways to make or find time for shared reflection. Their examples suggest direction for others.**

Ask anybody directly involved in school reform about its most essential ingredient, and the answer is likely to be “time.” Research concurs. Collaborative time for teachers to undertake and then sustain school improvement may be more important than equipment or facilities or even staff development (Fullan and Miles 1992, Louis 1992, Rosenholtz 1989).

We’ve long known that for school change to succeed, teachers collectively must be involved in its implementation (Berman and McLaughlin 1978, McLaughlin 1991). But unless the “extra energy requirements” demanded are met by the provision of the time, the change is not likely to succeed (Fullan and Miles 1992).

The literature on teacher worklives also concludes that even when change efforts are not under way, collaborative time for teachers is necessary. Successful schools are distinguishable from unsuccessful ones by the frequency and extent to which teachers discuss practice, collaboratively design materials, and inform and critique one another (Little 1982). This sort of interaction appears necessary to continuing growth and improvement in the individual as well as to sustaining a good school (Wildman and Niles 1987).

Yet another body of research points to the importance of collaborative time for teachers by suggesting that even in good schools, change as well as stability must be evident. As Goodlad put it (1983), schools must be “self-renewing systems” (Tye and Tye 1984). Or, in more recent terms, they must be “learning organizations” marked by deliberate effort to identify helpful knowledge and spread its use within the organization (Senge 1990, Louis and Simsek 1991). The reason, as Rosenholtz forthrightly put it, is that either schools are growing or they are stuck (1989).

If schools are to remain “un-stuck,” then teachers must have time for sustained collaborative reflection on school practice, conditions, and events. None of this is to say that collaboration time alone can assure success. How the time is used is crucial, but making or finding it is necessary (Prager 1992). In fact, time has emerged as *the* key issue in every analysis of school change appearing in the last decade (Fullan and Miles 1992).

### Making the Time

Some places have simply bitten the bullet and added meeting days to the school year and teachers to the school staff. At UCLA’s University Elementary School, for instance, 20 pupil-free teacher workdays are now being built into the annual calendar. A staffing pattern assigning six teachers to four classes also frees teachers on a rotating basis (Watson et al. 1992). But not all schools can hope for such arrangements, and in today’s economy most will probably have to find or create low-cost ways to make time for school improvement.

Are there ways to provide this collaboration time without substantially increasing school costs? A number of school people quite ready to tackle genuine restructuring report this to be the most stubborn barrier. Often teachers are willing to contribute *some* of their own time—but quite *reasonably* are unwilling to shoulder the full cost of what, after all, is a system responsibility—and what research confirms must be a continuing one. Even if teachers were willing to assume the full costs of the new requirements, their efforts would probably prove insufficient to the task. Ten minutes before the kids arrive, and conversational snatches during the day, are only enough for news flashes and crisis-meeting—not for analyzing and planning and creating.

I surveyed how schools are making the necessary collaborative time, supplementing what I had seen by asking regional and national innovative school groups about plans for freeing up teacher time. Here is how some schools throughout the country are meeting this challenge.

## **Fifteen Good Examples**

1. At the Mohegan Elementary School in the Bronx, teachers piloting a new curriculum are scheduled for the same daily lunch period and a common preparation period immediately thereafter—giving them a total of 90 minutes of shared time daily.
2. Central Park East Secondary School in Manhattan, a 450-student combined junior-senior high school, is composed of three divisions, each with two houses—or two sets of students and teachers who work together. On one morning of every week, the lower division students of one house engage in community service. Their teachers meet together until noon, when the students return to school.
3. The organizational structure of Central Park East also lends itself to a different sort of grouping of teachers for meetings. Community service time can be scheduled by houses (a house being a single group of students), or it can reflect curriculum and assemble the division teachers from two houses who deal with a common content area. In previous years, the high school has scheduled meetings on a curricular (team) basis; now this is done on a house (student) basis.
4. In schools and districts of substantial size, increasing class size by just one or two students can yield a surplus sufficient to finance teams of substitutes. The substitutes cover classes on a regular basis, permitting teacher teams to meet frequently.
5. In Merritt Island, Florida, the Gardendale Elementary Magnet School has adopted a year-round calendar, with three-week inter-sessions between quarters. The inter-sessions permit concentrated, two- or three-day meetings for teacher planning, for which participants receive compensatory time.
6. On Long Island, New York, school districts commonly set aside three to five days per year for teachers to attend day-long staff development meetings. To encourage regular collaborative sessions for teachers, some districts are rescheduling this time. When divided up, five staff development days permit 13 two-hour sessions, or one every two weeks throughout the school year.
7. In Kentucky, the State Board of Education sought legislative permission to convert five of the required instructional days into staff development time (“States” 1992).
8. The Texas Commissioner of Education sought authority from the Legislature to waive up to 15 instructional days to make them available for staff development (Gursky 1991).
9. Also at Mohegan in the Bronx, where a Cultural Literacy curriculum is being developed, the principal offered to dismiss classes 45 minutes early each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday if the teachers would extend the time by contributing 45 minutes of their own.
10. Some years ago, a Rhode Island superintendent lengthened the school day by 20 minutes for four days in order to dismiss students at noon on the fifth. He made Wednesdays teacher meeting days and persuaded local churches to hold their religious education programs on Wednesday afternoons, and scouts and other youth activities to meet then. A small group of faculty remained with and supervised (on a rotating basis) the youngsters of working parents unable to make other arrangements.
11. Kapaa Elementary School, on Kauai, Hawaii, has opened six schools-within-schools to accommodate its 1,500 students. The school is large enough to have a “supplemental staff” of art, music, physical education, computer, speech-drama and gifted-talented specialists, who meet with various classes (rather than offering scheduled classes of their own). The principal has asked the supplemental staff to collaborate regularly to plan a half-day program, which they will use—as a team—successively in each of the six schools-within-schools. After rotating one collectively designed program through all six schools-within-schools, they will design another program.

Eventually, each school-within-a-school team will be freed for a half-day's collaboration each two-and-one-half weeks throughout the school year.

12. At the Urban Academy in Manhattan, students participate in volunteer community service activities each Wednesday afternoon. With the help of the program's community service coordinator, each student has a semester-long assignment of providing some service function in the community—for example, helping in a legislative office, a teenage treatment facility, or an animal rescue group. This arrangement gives Academy teachers the full afternoon on Wednesdays for meeting. Faculty meetings occur regularly during this time, and each features one or more issues for deliberation.
13. Brooklyn College Academy—an alternative high school—classes are scheduled daily from 7:30 to 3:30. Even though the early morning “0” period is limited to special classes, clubs, and tutoring, the Academy finds that state time minimum requirements can be met in four-and-one-half days. Thus, faculty meet every Monday from 12:45–2:30 one week and 12:45–3:10 the next.
14. According to the superintendent of New York City's alternative high schools, the secret to finding collaboration time during the school day lies in “creative interpretation” of state requirements for instruction. He discovered that the time requirements could be met in four, rather than five, classes per week, permitting the blocking of “specials” (physical education, art, music, industrial arts) on the fifth day. For example, on Fridays a particular group of youngsters may take two periods of physical education, followed by one each of music and industrial arts. This configuration frees other teachers for regular, extended collaborative sessions.
15. In Ft. Myers, Florida, a new teacher contract set the workday for teachers at an hour longer than that for students—leaving time after school each day for teachers to meet.

## Other Promising Arrangements

In addition to the approaches just described, several others have substantial potential.

*Service learning* is currently being used to create teacher collaboration time in some places (as at Manhattan's Urban Academy, item 12 above), but it has even broader potential for doing so. For instance, although service learning programs are usually confined to high schools, they can also be used at middle and even elementary school levels. (One such program, in Lakewood, Colorado, has thrived for years. See Jenner and Elliott 1987.)

In light of the increasing popularity of service learning and the demonstrated benefits to those who provide the services, it may be desirable to explore the possibilities of having older students regularly tutor and coach younger ones. Arrangements of this sort can free teachers for collaborative time, while a skeleton force oversees the volunteers.

Another arrangement with potential is suggested by a program at Detroit's Washington Middle School. Several years ago, the principal made every Friday *Hobby Day*, when all the adults in the school (not just the teaching staff) taught classes on their various interests. Youngsters signed up for two-hour classes offered over a period of six Fridays, to learn such skills as photography, puppetry, barbershop-style singing, and gourmet cooking. In addition to responding to the demand for “exploratories” for the young adolescent age group, this program proved an effective way for youngsters to interact with adults in a somewhat different way. The arrangement in effect enlarged the teaching staff for one day a week. Through careful scheduling of the hobby groups, such a program could also permit different groups of teachers to work together for a few hours every Friday.

Asian schools have found yet another approach for creating collaboration time for teachers. In Asia, class sizes are much larger than ours—though within schools, the total ratio of teachers to students is quite similar. The *large-class framework* means that teachers teach fewer classes and have more time to confer with colleagues (and students) and to accomplish other things. American teachers resist the idea of increasing class size. On the other hand, Asian teachers are negative about the toll exacted by small classes: from 30 to 40 percent of their hours in school are spent

otherwise than in classes. They ask how American teachers can ever be expected to do a good job, given their circumstances (Stigler and Stevenson 1991).

Still another avenue with possibility is the popular *partnership concept*. A university partner, in particular, has such potential—least demandingly perhaps through providing films, TV lessons, and demonstrations, all with interactive teaching arrangements. Where university partners handle instruction and design follow-up activities, aides and paraprofessionals may well be able to handle monitoring, thus freeing teachers.

Well short of such extensive arrangements, it is not uncommon for *grants* providing start-up costs for new programs to cover collaboration time—often under the guise of staff training or development time. But as desirable as such programs and arrangements may be in serving a variety of purposes, they cannot yield the reliable, continuing time for teacher collaboration that research suggests is necessary to sustain good teacher and good school functioning. In addition, programs that yield collaboration for some but not all—or for a group assembling people from various schools, or only for a program initiation period—are not sufficient. The need for a school's faculty members to reflect together on their practice—and for schools to remain collaborative, self-renewing entities—does not end once teachers are trained and programs established.

## The Lessons Emerging

Other investigators have identified the following general approaches to finding collegial interaction time: freeing up existing time, restructuring or rescheduling it, using it better, or purchasing it (Watts and Castle 1992). The arrangements described here reflect specific strategies. In the first place, they suggest different levels at which the search for time can be conducted: school, district, and state.

*Schools* with sufficient control over their own programs may be able to find collaboration time through individual teacher scheduling and staff redeployment (as suggested in items 1–4). Other answers to the time question may be solutions that *districts* must adopt or authorize (for example, items 4–6). Still others can be initiated at the *state* level (items 7 and 8).

These examples not only suggest permissions and authorizations that may need to be obtained; they also suggest that at each of these three levels the search can be initiated and needed time found. They also indicate some general strategies that are being employed in the search for time. Some add the hours needed by supplementing the school's existing time (5 and 9); others reallocate existing time (1, 2, 6). “Banking” is a frequent strategy used either to meet instructional minimum requirements (by saving time in some fashion, or adding it to free the hours needed for collaborative sessions—as in item 10), or to demonstrate teacher productivity increases that offset the costs of substitutes to cover released time. Auxiliary or special subject teachers are sometimes used to free up time for teacher collaboration (as in 11 and 14), as are nonteaching staff (as at Washington Middle School).

Fundamentally, only a few broad approaches exist for tackling the challenge. The time can be found by:

- taking time from that now scheduled for other things (instruction or staff development, for instance);
- adding additional time to the school day and/or the school year; or
- altering staff utilization patterns—so that all administrators regularly do some teaching, for instance, or so that some teachers assume responsibility for more youngsters while other teachers meet.

## Making Found Time Worthwhile

Once time for teachers to collaborate has been found, how should it be allocated and scheduled? Experience to date recommends some useful criteria. First, teachers cannot be expected to undertake serious collective examination of their programs—and the design of new programs—at the end of the regular school day. The psychic exhaustion that

most teachers face at this time simply precludes such demanding endeavor. Second, not only must the collaborative time come from the “prime-time” school day, but it must be a sustained interval. A single period (a common prep period, for instance, for the members of a design or sustaining team) will not suffice. Such a period may be adequate, however, if placed immediately before or after a shared lunchtime—assuming the result is an uninterrupted block instead of two separate or divided segments. While some of the time needed can be left for concentrated periods when students are away from schools (during inter-sessions or summers), there must also be opportunities to reflect on daily events, make corrective decisions, and respond in a timely fashion to new conditions. Finally, in finding the time for substantial, continuing teacher collaboration, two opposing concerns must be kept in mind: (1) it is neither fair nor wise to ask teachers to deduct all the time needed from their personal lives (like weekends and holidays), even with compensation; and (2) conscientious teachers are reluctant to be away from their classrooms for an extended time unless they can feel confident about what’s happening in their absence. Thus, schools need ongoing, carefully planned programs for classroom coverage.

As these four guidelines suggest, it will be hard to avoid either pupil-free school days or extended pupil-free periods within school days. Ultimately, then, a change must occur in both public and professional conceptions about teacher productivity. It has long been assumed that teachers’ productive time consists of contact time spent with students (Watts and Castle 1992). Time spent otherwise has been seen as either a bureaucratic necessity (such as faculty meetings), an individual professional obligation (as in lesson planning), or a job amenity or benefit (such as a prep period). What must change is the idea that for a teacher, it is only in the classroom with students that “the rubber meets the road.”

At a Wingspread Conference of more than a decade ago, Ted Sizer suggested that perhaps the single move that could most help schools would be to maintain the present school hours of teachers, reduce the number of student hours by one a day, and use the gained time for teacher discussion and joint planning. While such possibilities may still appear remote, they are not impossible. In many contract negotiations, the principle that a good school requires more of teachers than student contact and individual planning time has now been established.

If collaborative endeavor is necessary to school adequacy, then *schools* must provide it. The responsibility rests with schools, not individual teachers. Further, administrators, policymakers, and public alike must accept a new conception of school time. If we are to redefine teachers’ responsibilities to include collaborative sessions with colleagues—and both organizational research and teacher effectiveness research now suggests they are essential to good schools—then it is necessary to reconstrue teacher time. The time necessary to examine, reflect on, amend, and redesign programs is not *auxiliary* to teaching responsibilities—nor is it “released time” from them. It is absolutely central to such responsibilities, and essential to making schools succeed!

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