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## THE GIFT OF TIME

*Schools get creative to carve out collaborative time for teachers*

BY VALERIE VON FRANK

Principal Michael Jeffers struggled for years to find a way to give teachers regular times to meet together in professional learning communities. Finally, after several years of discussion, Hickman High School (Columbia, Mo.) will begin classes a half-hour later every Tuesday this school year to allow built-in collaboration time for teachers.

New Principal Melissa Usiak walked into a building in Holt (Mich.) Public Schools that had scheduled early-released days for students every Wednesday for a decade. When she took over the helm in fall 2007, Usiak already knew what to expect.

Every one of the dozen school buildings in the Holt Public Schools operates to afford teachers weekly collaborative time. Elementary buildings dismiss at 1:25 p.m. rather than 3:25



p.m. on Wednesdays, while 5th-6th grade buildings are released at 1:20 p.m. rather than 3:20 p.m. Students in 7th through 12th grades begin class at 10:20 a.m. or 10:45 a.m. on those days.

"This is a structured time, which research says you need set aside, to do that learning," Usiak said. "What a gift to have that time!"

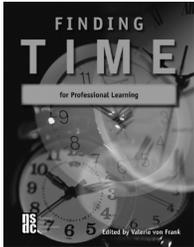
Schools and districts across the country have found ways to embed time for teacher collaboration within the school day. While some do so only during districtwide released days or

before or after school, more and more are finding that allowing teachers time every week during the work day for collaboration is truly the best practice (see box, p. 7).

Hickman High's Jeffers said teachers were able to meet only once a month at his school in the past, and they did so after regular school

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## Schools get creative to carve out learning time for teachers



### FROM THE NSDC BOOKSTORE

#### Finding Time for Professional Learning

Edited by Valerie von Frank

A compilation of articles and tools about time published in NSDC's newsletters and *JSD* in the last decade. Includes suggestions about how to use the articles to guide the discussion about time in your school and district. (NSDC, 2007)

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hours. "It just didn't work," he said. "Teachers had bought into the value of collaboration, but the time structure was really dragging it down." Finding a consistent time to meet within the work day has been "a huge morale boost for our staff," he said.

"I believe collaboration is the only way you're ever going to have the fundamental change you need for teachers to really talk about how they're going to help students become more successful," Jeffers said.

"You've got to give teachers the time to work together, to work on things like common assessments and teaching strategies, and to talk about results.

"Teachers get the message that what they are doing is important: If they're given time, they're going to make good use of the time," he continued. "I've already seen results from departments that have established common assessments, where staff are having great conversations around student results; they're working together. They've built camaraderie in the building."

The high school teachers arrive at their usual 7:20 a.m., but with the half-hour of student-free time, they now have an hour to meet together each week. Classes are 45 minutes rather than 50 minutes on Tuesdays, and the students' day is extended by five minutes the remainder of the week.

Jeffers said staff also meet in interdisciplinary teams once a month around a schoolwide theme. Teachers who might not have gotten to know each other or work together meet and talk about common strategies and ways to improve student learning. "We just went through our North Central Association evaluation," Jeffers said, "and the time was invaluable for doing some of the work we needed to do for that accreditation."

### OVERCOMING HURDLES

Jeffers said a number of "rules" played into the school's proposal to the Columbia Public

Schools board for this year's pilot of early dismissal. He set these parameters:

**Rule No. 1: Maintain the length of teachers' work week.** Jeffers said teachers' contracted time was not altered by including their regular arrival time and carving out the additional 30 minutes from student contact time.

**Rule No. 2: Get staff commitment to the collaborative time.** "We started talking about collaboration, and we were having once a month or once every six weeks — and really that's

not collaboration," Jeffers said. "It needs to be a sustained time, at least once a week, built into the school day. When teachers had seen the value of the time, we had a referendum of the faculty as to whether they wanted to ask the district to pilot this collaborative model. And 84% (of the 185 teachers) said yes."

**Rule No. 3: Don't touch the buses.** The ripple effect on other

schools' busing routes of changing Hickman's bused-in students' arrival time would make it difficult for the revised schedule to be accepted, Jeffers said. Instead, bused students are allowed in restricted areas within the building from 7:45 a.m. to 8:15 a.m., including the library, computer lab, cafeteria, or commons area, and administrators provide supervision.

**Rule No. 4: Communicate with stakeholders.** The school sent parents information over the summer, discussed the change at Open House, and received media coverage of the change. "Make sure everyone's on board," Jeffers said.

### EFFORTS PAY OFF

Jeffers said the change hasn't been easy. The school includes a career center with students from all over the district, and their schedules did not match and had to be coordinated. Students are getting used to the late-start days and have to be reminded not to loiter on private property surrounding the school, he said. But he believes the extra effort is more than worth it.

"It's a way for people to feel like they're

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### NSDC'S BELIEF

Schools' most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.

## Schools find time for adults to learn

In these schools and others across the country, a shortened student day once a week has become the norm for finding time for teachers' professional development. The schools have carefully planned to meet state requirements for instructional time.

Consider these examples:

- Classes begin 30 minutes late on Wednesdays at **Holtville High School** in **Holtville, Calif.** Teachers arrive a half-hour earlier than their scheduled time on other workdays, giving them one hour for collaborative planning in study groups.
- At **Sarah Cobb Elementary School** in **Americus, Ga.**, students are released one day a week at 1:30 p.m. instead of the regular 3:30 p.m. dismissal time. Since the school already exceeded the state's requirement for instructional time, it did not have to add time to the remaining school days. The school received a waiver from the Georgia Board of Education for early release.
- On Mondays in **Jackson Elementary School** in **Greeley, Colo.**, students leave at 1:45 p.m. and teachers leave at 4:25 p.m.
- **Hefferan Elementary School**, on the

west side of Chicago, provides large blocks of training and planning time for teachers during school hours.

In addition to individual schools, some districts have committed to providing this job-embedded time:

- A number of elementary schools in California's **San Diego Unified School District** have one day a week when students are dismissed two hours earlier so teachers have time for professional development.
- **Iowa City, Iowa**, schools release students an hour early every Thursday and teachers stay at school until 4 p.m.
- Students at all of the six schools in **Woodford County, Ky.**, are dismissed two hours early on one Wednesday a month. Teachers use time after school on another Wednesday a month to meet in study groups rather than having a faculty meeting.
- **Carman-Ainsworth Community Schools** in **Flint, Mich.**, gives teachers an hour every Wednesday morning to meet, scheduling students to begin an hour later and having teachers report 15 minutes earlier than usual.



### SAMPLE SCHOOL SCHEDULES

For a sample high school and elementary school schedule, see "Target time toward teachers," by Linda Darling-Hammond in the Spring 1999 issue of *Journal of Staff Development*, 20(2), 31-36.

Available online at [www.nsd.org/publications/articleDetails.cfm?articleID=51](http://www.nsd.org/publications/articleDetails.cfm?articleID=51).

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part of something, to have input and interact," he said. "That time is for teachers to be involved without impeding on everything else on their plate. This is not overload because it's built into the day. ... It's not easy. Tuesday mornings are not my favorite time as an administrator. But those are things you have to trade off; think of the greater good."

Usiak said that, despite Holt's decade of experience in having the time, the district is in a continuous cycle of evaluation for how best to use it.

"There's an evolution here in how we spend our time," she said. "We're redefining what we use that time for, setting parameters and structures. I'm really trying to get the staff to rethink what these Wednesdays are for; I really want

them focused on student work and student data."

In Boyle County Schools in Kentucky, where students are dismissed two hours early one Wednesday a month, Assistant Superintendent Michael LaFavers said his district has spent a decade "getting it right." Students regularly achieve in the top tier in central Kentucky, and while LaFavers doesn't give all the credit to any one initiative, he said finding released time for teacher collaboration is important.

"If you don't create time for professionals to work together to talk about student learning, assessment, about whether students are making progress," LaFavers said, "you're going to suffer the consequences as a school district. You *have* to figure out some way to create the time. This is one way you can do that, and it's been effective for us." ■