DEVELOP A PROTOCOL TO MAKE THE MOST OUT OF SCHOOL VISITS

I recently had the opportunity to visit schools with a superintendent of a large urban school system. I enjoyed spending the morning observing instruction and interacting with teachers and students. On this particular morning, the superintendent had told principals she was interested in observing math classes. At each school, the principal escorted us through a number of math classrooms, allowing time to observe instruction, talk to students, and visit with the teachers.

We discussed what we learned as we traveled from high school to high school by car. At the end of the morning, the superintendent was satisfied that she had achieved the agenda she had set for the visits. However, she wondered about ways she might improve the process. I used that observation as an opportunity to think about how superintendents and principals might leverage school visits to advance effective professional learning.

What is your objective?

I welcome your suggestions on objectives for school visits as a reply to my posting on this topic on NSDC's blog (**www.nsdc.org/learningBlog**) so that together we can expand upon the bulleted list at right.

While not every school visit offers an opportunity to improve professional development for all school staff, most school visits can. There is a missed opportunity when leaders don't use school visits for that purpose. With the permission of my superintendent colleague, I offer a few suggestions. While her intention was to get a sense of math instruction in the high school, the principals acted as escorts rather than providing their views to her about what was working well and where improvement was necessary. If the principals had a protocol in advance to guide the visit, the entire process — from preparation through debrief — becomes a powerful learning experience for all involved.

OBJECTIVES FOR SCHOOL VISITS

So while not all visits can offer these learning opportunities, many can. Consider these potential objectives for school visits:

- To model the district's expectation for classroom observation strategies;
- To calibrate how principals and teacher leaders define, recognize, and document effective teaching;
- To assess the quality of professional learning occurring during faculty meetings;
- To monitor learning teams' applications of a district's cycle of improvement;
- To assess to what degree teachers are following district pacing guides and curriculum documents;
- To determine to what degree teachers are using effective teaching strategies identified in the district's instructional framework;
- To demonstrate how talking to and observing students can provide a powerful source of data on the instructional program; and
- To convene focus groups to discuss the quality and value of professional development in addressing student learning needs.

In each issue of *JSD*, Stephanie Hirsh will share a professional learning challenge and possible solutions that create results for educators and their students. All columns are available at www.nsdc.org.

ASSESSING THE CYCLE OF IMPROVEMENT

I'll elaborate on two of these ideas. In my first example, the objective of the visit is to determine how learning team meetings apply the district's cycle of improvement.

A superintendent or principal informs learning teams to expect a visit. The visitors will be observing their next team meeting and recording answers to the following questions:

- Which student performance data were reviewed and what did the data tell the learning team?
- How does the learning team use the data to determine specific learning needs for students and the team?
- How will the learning team acquire new knowledge or skills it needs?
- If the learning team is reviewing recent learning experiences, can it identify what new knowledge and skills were gained and whether the investment was a smart decision?
- How does the team approach planning joint lessons, developing common assessments, and providing each other with classroom-based support?
- If the learning team is reviewing results from a recent classroom assessment that was developed to determine the impact of application of a new strategy or process,

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what results did it get and what will it do next?

- If the learning team is struggling with a problem, does it consider seeking help from an external assistance provider? How does the team talk about making this decision?
- What help does the team need from the principal, superintendent, or others in the central office?

Following the observation, the superintendent and principal debrief and determine what feedback to provide to the team and if any specific actions are required by central office staff. Follow-up actions may include asking a district facilitator to temporarily facilitate team meetings for a team that has strayed from its original purpose or identifying a content expert who can help the team with a problem it faces. In either case, the observation leads to action that demonstrates the administration's commitment to the learning team structure and advances higher quality collaborative work and learning. In addition, the superintendent has valuable data to share with central office administrators regarding how its vision for professional learning teams is being implemented in schools.

DO MEETINGS LEAD TO LEARNING?

In my second example, the objective of the school visit is to observe and document the quality of professional learning occurring during faculty meetings.

Faculty meetings provide principals a key opportunity to not only promote effective professional development for all educators but to model it as well. Savvy principals who take advantage of this opportunity begin faculty meetings by declaring an objective. Perhaps the purpose of the meeting is to share some recent student data such as benchmark exam results, and then to move the faculty into grade-level or subject-matter teams to examine the results at a deeper level. Perhaps the faculty had invested the previous six weeks in new instructional strategies and they are investigating to see if the data provide any indications that their new learning and practices affected the results. The principal's role is to use the data to promote reflective practice and ultimately to bring the faculty to a point where they can say what they need to learn and do next.

Learning is core to every conversation in this faculty meeting. While the principal uses the faculty meeting to promote reflective practice, the superintendent uses debriefing with the principal to promote reflective practice as well, and might ask some of the following questions to debrief the meeting.

- Was the objective for the meeting clear?
- Was there a learning goal?
- To what degree do you believe the faculty understood the goal?
- What do you believe the majority of the faculty learned today?
- What do you believe the majority will do next? What will you do next?
- Is there anything you would do differently to achieve your goal?

Returning to the morning I spent with my superintendent colleague: After reviewing this column, she developed the following protocol that she will use in the future to promote deeper learning and reflection for the principals in the school. She will invite the principal to join her on a math learning walk on a particular day and time. She will tell the principal that she is interested in reviewing his goal for math this year and what instructional strategies he expects to see in the classrooms. Following each classroom visit, they will record the instructional strategies they observed. Before the superintendent departs, they will discuss to what degree the instruction they observed represented the principal's priorities for the year and what actions the principal intends to take next.

Every time I speak to a group, someone asks me a question about time. It is our most precious resource in schools. We need to make sure that we are very deliberate about how we use it. In my view, we can use the time that administrators commit to school visits in even more powerful ways to advance professional learning for staff and students. What have you done to make the best use of your school visits? I'd like to hear from you, and I invite you to respond to my suggestions. ■

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