

Using Our Best Resources—Each Other

How a one-year PD partnership between two elementary school faculties improved communication, idea sharing, and morale.

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Our traditional professional development format at faculty meetings felt tired. While our schools—Constable and Monmouth Junction Elementary Schools in the South Brunswick School District in New Jersey—are known for their commitment to meaningful and innovative professional development for staff, weekly Monday faculty meetings didn't always match that innovation. They tended to involve informational staff discussions or in-house professional development workshops, often taking place late in the afternoon after a full work day.

It was time for a change, one that could combine the collective talents and experience of our two schools. For the 2017–2018 school year, we planned a year-long, teacher-centered professional development series that stretched beyond teachers' typical grade-level teams at their schools. This was done by bringing the faculty from both schools together to openly share their best resources and strategies with one another. A simple idea, but also, as we discovered, a powerful one.

This type of collaboration seemed natural for

our two schools. For one, there were multiple connections between the staffs and administrative teams. The two principals, Peter at Constable and Cristina at Monmouth Junction, had each previously served as assistant principal in the other school, and Kathleen is currently in a shared position as assistant principal at both schools. The buildings are also only a seven-minute drive from each other, making inter-school faculty meetings fairly easy to schedule. In addition, the district had a grade-level “job-alike” structure in place that, while infrequently used, was a form of professional development with which teachers were familiar. Our faculty-meeting adaptation afforded these schools an opportunity to modify a known PD structure, in a smaller and more targeted



setting, to better meet the teachers' specific needs.

Our instincts about the possible benefits of bringing the staffs of both schools together for a more expansive and collaborative form of PD proved correct. Coming together three times that year created enhanced coalitions necessary for authentic professional learning. Teachers had the opportunity to share their best practices, thus learning the best of what others have implemented as well. Bringing their own expertise to the table, teachers explored a variety of topics, including self-regulation, instructional technology, and home-school connections. We were able to say goodbye to one-size-fits-all faculty meetings. Our teachers were energized, in the driver's seat, and actively engaged in free, meaningful, teacher-led professional development on topics of their choosing.

Here's how we did it.

Session 1: Targeted Topics

A big frustration of many educators is that district or school professional development sessions do not actually meet their needs. Teachers want to grow and improve, but they want the resources they need to do so, not just the resources that administrators think they need.

To get out of this rut, we had grade-level teams at each school meet prior to the first professional development event to develop a list of topics they needed or wanted to improve on. Each school's grade-level team entered two topics on a shared spreadsheet. The other school's team reviewed those topics and selected the one they thought they could best address and support.

The results were amazing. Each



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school's team gathered resources to support their counterpart's area of need and brought the resources to our session. On the day of our meeting, teachers were divided into grade-level work groups. We split the session's time into two parts—half for one school to provide help and suggest resources to the other, and the second half for the roles to be reversed.

The teachers got to work right away, and the discussions were rich and vibrant. They were also wide-ranging, with groups of teachers focused on topics such as supporting struggling readers during independent work time or incorporating technology in more meaningful ways. They shared resources such as copies of anchor charts used in writing lessons, samples of student research projects and accompanying rubrics, and weekly tracking sheets to build self-regulation skills. Because the teachers were grouped according to grade level, the resources provided were tied to their curriculum and relevant to the students they taught. Most important, they were “doable,” since teachers knew their

peers had already tried them. As administrators, we were amazed by the positive energy. We wrapped up the 40-minute session with a quick whole-group debrief of general observations and comments.

Session 2: Professional Development, Buffet Style

For our second session, we wanted to expand on the small-group discussions by creating a “buffet-style” professional development that would allow for a wider sharing of best practices. We asked the teachers to choose one resource or strategy they used with their students and considered to be a personal point of pride. They created a one-page handout explaining this point of pride, either by using a template we provided or by exercising full creative control to design whatever they'd like. As administrators, we also created our own pages to show staff that we truly valued the process.

On the day of the session, the gymnasium was transformed into an instructional resource buffet. Copies of all the one-page points of pride ideas were set up on tables all around

the gym, sorted by category (technology, parent outreach, instructional strategies). Teachers roamed about, reviewing the handouts and taking copies of the ones that interested them. They approached one another to ask questions or gain additional insights on the resource or strategy outlined on the page.

The buzz in the room was invigorating. For instance, a 4th grade teacher shared a description and screenshot of how she uses the Remind app on a daily basis to send quicker and easier communication to parents in her class. Colleagues were heard talking about how this app could streamline their communication with families. Another popular resource was an ADHD Strategies document containing five topic columns, each listing specific strategies related to academics, parent connection, executive functioning, behavior, and social-emotional reinforcement to help teachers in their work with students with ADHD. One resource, a “Rolling Through the Text” idea provided by a 1st grade teacher at Monmouth Junction, was a game-based graphic organizer for students to use to build active-reading and comprehension skills. This tool was later employed by a 3rd grade teacher at Constable, who tweeted pictures of her students rolling the dice to determine which reading prompt(s) they were going to use.

Session 3: Full Circle PD

The final session took place in May, just before the end of the school year. We took advantage of the timing to have staff members share their best beginning- or end-of-year resource or strategy. We emphasized that teachers should not worry about preparing anything new, but just bring copies of something they’ve used in the past.

Groups were divided into dual-grade teams (K and 1st, 2nd and 3rd, 4th and 5th) to share their ideas. Prior to gathering for some final words of closure and a few raffle ticket giveaways, teachers completed a reflective form to share one tool, strategy, or piece of new learning that they had tried or planned to try as a result of the three sessions. Here are some examples of what teachers wrote:

One tool that I plan to try is a resource that I received today. It is a phonological awareness calendar for the summer months. It has great, short activities for the kids to do every day for practice.

Next year, I plan to try Crystal’s “fill a bucket” classroom community idea. I think it is a great way to establish a community of kindness/respect.

I plan to try some of the beginning-of-the-year activities in the fall—specifically the four corners activity to gather information about student learning styles.

I like the idea of having students write a letter to next year’s students.

Learning from Each Other

We found many benefits to this combined-school format for professional development.

It gives teachers rich networking opportunities. Teachers don’t always have a diverse professional learning community and often rely on the teacher next door for ideas or troubleshooting. Recognizing this, as administrators and lead learners, it becomes (and is) our responsibility to provide opportunities for teachers to learn and grow from others beyond their immediate circle. It is our job to build the environment that teachers consistently ask us for—one of meaningful collaboration that enables teachers to learn from the best of what others do without reinventing the wheel. Both veteran and novice

teachers can create bonds beyond what the school building provides.

Our shared professional development sessions met these networking needs. The participant group size of approximately 40 teachers was small enough to allow for close, meaningful conversation, but large enough to allow for a wide variety of resources and perspectives to be shared. After the sessions, staff members from different schools continued to call and email each other about ideas or questions related to what they learned. Occasionally, a tweet with #COMJLrng (our hashtag for the sessions) would pop up, highlighting a resource a teacher learned from a colleague and successfully implemented in his or her own classroom. One teacher noted the following on an exit ticket for one of the sessions:

As a newer teacher, I really valued gaining new resources and activities and lessons to use in my classroom. It is always great to see things that teachers from other schools in the district are doing.

It emphasizes our teachers’ greatness by affirming the wonderful things already happening in our schools. When planning this series, we sought to value our teachers’ knowledge and resources. Over the course of our time together, we had all staff members share points of pride. This reaffirmation was uplifting for teachers and showed them that you don’t need a new resource book or outside presenter to spark a new idea or to enhance a practice already in place. Reflecting on this, one of our staff members wrote:

I greatly enjoyed collaborating with colleagues and sharing resources. Why reinvent the wheel when all of us are doing amazing things in our classrooms that we can so easily share? It was nice to hear a lot of us are doing/using the same things, but also each

individual was able to share something unique they do, and we were so easily able to take it and apply it right into our own classrooms.

It allows teachers to lead their own learning. When planning this three-part series, we went out of our way to make each session *for teachers, by teachers*. We surveyed their interests, needs, and learning styles, pulled teachers into planning meetings, gave teachers voice and choice, and most important . . . stepped back so they could lead one another and their own learning.

As a result, a common theme emerged. Teachers were invigorated by the freedom to learn, grow, and collaborate with their cross-town counterparts. The sessions were long enough for teachers to discover something interesting or wrap their minds around a new concept or idea, but were short enough to prevent participants from feeling overwhelmed. The discussions were tied to grade-level curriculum and therefore were relevant and useful to those sitting around the table. Knowing that a colleague across town found a way to make a particular strategy work and come to life made teachers feel like they could do it, too. Teachers left intrigued, energized, and invigorated.

Taking the Dread Out of PD

While each session we organized had a deliberate focus, there was a laid-back feel to the format. Participants were equals. Since everyone brought an idea to the table, everyone became a presenter, and the session naturally turned from traditional professional development with a presenter “on stage” to a rich, collaborative conversation. This put staff members at ease and eliminated the stressors that can come along with new learning when only a handful of teachers are tapped to stand and deliver professional

Five Quick Tips to Starting a Dual-School PD Program

1

Look for meaningful school pairings (schools with natural shared staff connections, schools of similar size, or schools with similar needs or demographics).

2

Communicate! Create a joint-school email list and send out all necessary information in advance so teachers are clear on what you expect from the onset. The clearer the better!

3

Details, details, details! With limited faculty meeting time, every detail counts. Ensure there is ample parking, sufficient signage, and directions that allow teachers to “self-start” upon arrival. This will save precious minutes.

4

As administrators, resist the urge to jump in. This method of professional development is powerful because teachers are driving their own learning. Simply be the guide on the side.


5

Make it fun. Greet them with a surprise treat, raffle off prizes to end meetings, and don’t forget to follow up with a thank you email. Your efforts will go a long way.

development in front of their peers.

As a result, the teachers’ engagement levels increased. Groups remained on task, but even more telling, we had to pull several of the groups away from the table when time was up, as they were so engaged in their conversation and sharing of strategies that they didn’t want the time to end. Staff expressed excitement about reconvening for the opportunity to work and learn alongside one another in this way.

Going forward, we hope to take the structures we already have in place and the lessons we learned from this series to help our teachers with continued networking—both in-district and beyond our district. We know this method of having teachers learn from one another works, and we look forward to seeing how it can be expanded and enriched in the future.

Of course, as with all good PD programming, a considerable amount of behind-the-scenes planning was done to ensure that we chose the best topics to address, that the right methods of strategy sharing were used, and that as many obstacles as possible were removed for teachers prior to each session. The key difference with this style of professional development is that while administration led the planning and implementation, teachers led the learning. 

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