

EVERYDAY LEADERSHIP EVERYDAY LEADERSHIP EVERYDAY LEADERSHIP

Supporting Student Learning

Your school's philosophy should be reflected in opportunities for collaboration among teachers, student motivation, parent involvement, and principal professional development.

By Ronald Williamson and Barbara R. Blackburn

Ronald Williamson is a professor of leadership and counseling at Eastern Michigan University.

Barbara R. Blackburn is an assistant professor in the Department of Middle, Secondary, and K-12 Education at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte.

They are the coauthors of The Principalship From A to Z and Rigorous Schools and Classrooms: Leading the Way, both published by Eye on Education (www.eyeoneducation.com). Material for this column is adapted from these books.

The organization of your school can affect your ability to improve student learning. Structural elements—such as the way time is used, the arrangements for collaboration, and the opportunities for sustained discussion of student learning in your school—can either be barriers to reform or ways to accelerate the work. This column will discuss several elements that reflect a commitment to students.

Support Teacher Collaboration

We've found that providing collaborative time is one of the catalysts for nurturing and sustaining change. Teachers value the opportunity to meet with grade-level or content-area peers to discuss successes, discover ways to improve, and develop strategies that they can use in their own classrooms.

There are many different ways to provide collaborative time (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). The strategies vary greatly because they are based on the resources that are available at each school.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are a common way to work collaboratively to improve the rigor of your school and your classrooms. PLCs take many forms but are uniformly focused on improving student learning. They are most successful when collaborative time is used to talk about student learning and to identify strategies for making improvements. The focus should be on continuous improvement with a results orientation.

Common planning time for teachers on a team or in a content area is one of the most frequently used ways to provide collaborative time. But ar-



anging common planning time can be difficult in some schedules.

Another way to provide collaborative time is to use scheduled faculty meeting time for team meetings, evaluation of student work, book study groups, or other collaborative activities. You can use e-mail or other methods to share the routine information that is traditionally part of a faculty meeting. One school we worked with used the first monthly meeting for routine business and the second for collaborative work.

A third way to provide collaborative time is to redesign the use of professional development days. Rather than engage in a large group activity, use the time in small, collaborative groups.

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Support Students

In addition to holding high expectations for students, it is important to provide students with the extra support they need to be successful. Teachers and principals remind us regularly of the importance of motivating students to do well in school and supporting their successes.

Structures should allow students to see the value in what they do and give them an opportunity to experience success. When they see value in what they are doing and believe that they can be successful at it, they will be motivated.

Lessons should link what students are learning to things in their own lives and to things that they find useful. For example, a teacher delivers a math lesson about positive and negative integers and explains a number line using examples of money and the yards gained or lost in a football game. It is important to look at the content through the students' eyes.

Set rigorous expectations but make the tasks manageable. Too often, students have not experienced success and have become disengaged. It's not enough to tell students they can be successful; they must experience success. Designing lessons and assignments to enable students to be successful does not mean softball lessons that expect little from students, however.

Encourage teachers to divide rigorous projects into smaller pieces so that students can figure out where to start. Teachers must support students and allow them to experience success so that they can build on that experience

in other settings. Everyone is motivated by success.

Support Families

Families are your school's most important partners. It is essential that they be provided with the knowledge and tools to support the school's work and their children's success.

We've found the following structures helpful to families:

- Multiple methods of communication to frequently remind parents about your school's vision of increased rigor
- A Web site where parents can access resources about how they can support success in school (e.g., nutrition, sleep habits, quiet time for homework, and a place to do homework)
- Forums where families can share how they support student success
- Workshops for parents on topics that will support your agenda of increased rigor.

Support Leaders

It is also important to support yourself as a leader. Often leaders neglect their own need for support and continued learning, but we've learned that it is essential for leaders to have time to reflect on their own work, process their own learning, and consider how they can refine what they are doing to improve the rigor of their school.

We encourage you to consider some of the following ideas to provide support.

- Identify a coach or a mentor with whom you can talk about your work. Good coaches enable leaders to process their learning and to step back and

Writer's Guidelines

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To submit, please e-mail the manuscript in MS Word format to plmag@principals.org. Include a cover letter with contact information and a mailing address for each author, a two-sentence author biography for each author, and a statement of intent to submit exclusively to *Principal Leadership*. If a manuscript is accepted for publication, the author will be required to sign a transfer of intellectual property to NASSP. For detailed guidelines, please visit www.principals.org/pl_guidelines.

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Behavior and Discipline

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Deadline: May 10, 2010

OCTOBER 2010

Unique Student Populations

Often, educating small populations of students requires seemingly disproportionate amounts of time and money. Learn more about resources and strategies for accommodations and inclusion for student populations, such as special education, ELL, and physical disability.

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The State of Literacy

Being literate encompasses skills that foster advanced thinking, literary analysis, improved writing and growth in many curricular areas. Once students master reading, the fun is just starting.

Deadline: July 5, 2010

DECEMBER 2010

College Readiness

Schools, students, and parents have to begin planning for the postsecondary years in the middle grades so that students know what they need to be able to do to move on to college, training, or other pursuits.

Deadline: August 9, 2010

reflect on how they might improve their work.

- Stay current in the field by reading voraciously and attending conferences and other professional development activities.
- Find time to meet with colleagues to share ideas and think about how you can support one another's efforts.
- Join and maintain your membership in NASSP and other professional groups. Access their newsletters, journals, and other materials.

Final Thoughts

The organization and structure of your school is one of your most pow-

erful tools for shaping your school's program. Recognizing the connection between the structure—the way you use time, arrangements for collaboration, and opportunities for sustained discussion of student learning—and your commitment to improved student learning is essential. It is important to work with teachers and other school personnel to identify those structures that will most effectively support your commitment to a quality education for every student. **PL**

REFERENCE

- DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Many, T. (2006). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

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