Time Shift:

Developing Teacher Teams

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By Kurtis Hewson

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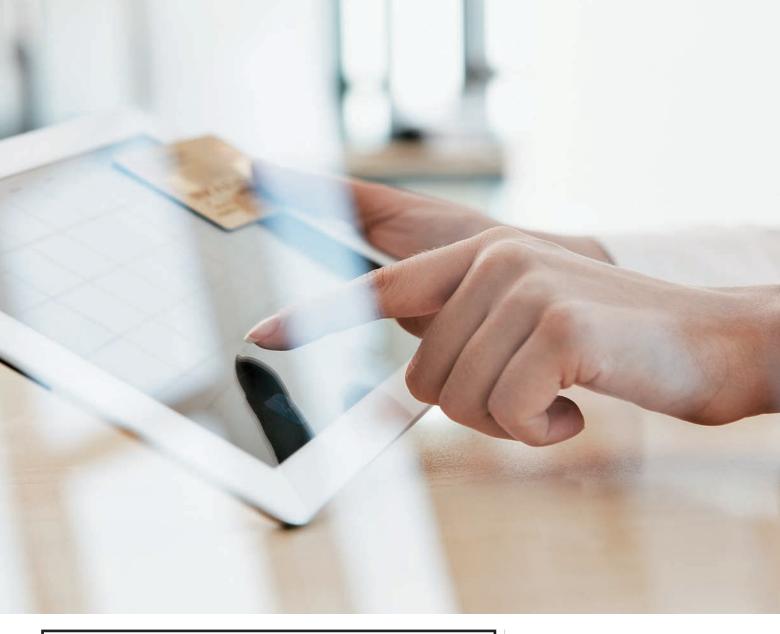
By Kurtis Hewson

As a new principal who wanted to support teaching and learning, I held a common conception of where my time would be best spent—in classrooms ensuring effective individual teacher instruction. Over time, I learned that this practice unwittingly supported a culture of professional isolationism that ran counter to the collaborative practices we strived to establish and support in the school. As a result, I shifted my schedule to support teams of teachers. This change resulted in much more effective use of my time as an instructional leader dedicated to improving student learning and fostering a collaborative culture.

Traditional Principal Supervision

Consider the traditional focus of instructional leadership, as described by Richard DuFour and Robert Marzano in their book, *Leaders of Learning: How District, School, and Classroom Leaders Improve Student Achievement* (2011):

> If a school with fifty classroom teachers has been structured so that those teachers work in isolation, principals will struggle to fulfill their myriad of responsibilities to each educator in his or her isolated classroom. Inevitably principals find it almost impossible to serve fifty different masters. Therefore, principals have either struggled to contrive ways to interact with teachers in the hopes of influencing their behavior or have resigned themselves to managing rather than leading their schools.

I personally experienced this phenomenon early in my career (albeit with a much smaller elementary school staff team), as I attempted to spend significant time in each teacher's classroom. The breadth of my investment in time came at the cost of depth, with time spread across a number of teachers' classrooms and ultimately consuming a large chunk of my overall schedule. Initially, I aimed to touch base in each teacher's classroom daily and then spend a full period once a week with every teacher, with additional time dedicated to new teachers or those being formally evaluated. Eventually, I kept the daily "pop-in" interaction but adjusted the other time in various ways, as I incorporated assorted observation and walk-through models and practices. In the end, I came to three general conclusions:

> **I aligned the master schedule** for the school and my schedule so that I could participate in each grade level's embedded collaborative team meeting.

1. Although it consumed a large amount of my weekly schedule, the time spent with each individual teacher was insignificant and generally had little impact on classroom instruction schoolwide.

2. Time to follow up and provide feedback was at an even greater premium. It was difficult to give meaningful feedback related to these classroom visits and even harder to offer support when I observed ineffective instruction.

3. In time, I recognized that the practice of visiting and observing individual classrooms further promoted professional isolation in the school, contrary to the collaborative culture we were trying to establish.

Essentially, spending a large portion of my time in individual classrooms had, at best, little impact on teaching and learning and, at worst, further perpetuated the conditions of isolation and insulation.

From Individuals to Teams

I modified how I spent time, which had been focused on individual teacher's instruction, shifting it to support teacher teams. I maintained the daily "pop-in" (as it has proved to pay dividends in relation to enhancing my visibility in the school and allowed

me to touch base with students in the classroom daily) and individual support for the small number of teachers undergoing formal evaluation (as instructed by district policy). However, I reallocated the remainder of my time that had been spent in individual classrooms to supporting teacher teams, structured as professional learning communities (PLCs).

I aligned the master schedule for the school and my schedule so that I could participate in each grade level's embedded collaborative team meeting time. At the time, it consisted of seven weekly team meetings (kindergarten to grade six) of approximately one hour each, which equated to roughly the same amount of time I had spent previously in individual classrooms. My role during that time fluctuated, depending on the needs of the team. At the start of the year, I worked collaboratively with each team to review student data, establish team goals and priorities for the year, and set professional development goals. I also reviewed the team norms developed at each grade level and assisted the team in developing professional learning goals to match their team goals and priorities. From that point, I continued to work weekly with teams, developing curriculum maps and common assessments as well as examining student results. This collaborative work proved to be different at each grade level, as determined by the goals and priorities they established collectively, but still aligned with our school's improvement focus. Every six weeks, staff members working with students at that grade level joined teachers in collaborative team meetings, where we discussed the progress of individual students at that grade level and determined appropriate intervention actions to address their needs.

Positive Results

Through this strategic shift toward working with teams rather than as an instructional manager observing individuals, the school attained a number of positive results.

■ I promoted and modeled collaboration in high-functioning PLCs. By being personally involved in the work of each PLC, including reviewing student data, establishing team goals and priorities, and developing curriculum maps and common assessments, I succeeded in guiding, supporting, and celebrating the meaningful collaborative work of teacher teams.

I was also able to challenge some longstanding, questionable instructional practices through collective inquiry and professional dialogue that would have inadvertently perpetuated power hierarchies if confronted through my previous individual classroom observations. By working with each team, I could differentiate support but still move us collectively forward in our work functioning as PLCs focused on student learning.

■ I gained a much deeper, more informed understanding of the individual learning needs of students in the school through examination of data and the resulting team dialogue than I could have accomplished by viewing the data on my own or observing students in the classroom. Over time, this benefited every grade-level team as I gained a more comprehensive understanding of students' learning background, could connect teachers' work with students as they progressed to higher grades, and could connect work happening between grade levels. As a principal with a deeper knowledge of each student's learning needs, successes, and struggles, I was better equipped to not only guide support for students but for teachers as well.

■ Overall, my credibility with teachers increased significantly as I repeatedly demonstrated a desire to support their work and "roll up my sleeves" to engage in the collaborative work as a colleague. As a result, I developed higher levels of trust among staff and forged more meaningful professional relationships with the adults in the building.

We know that principal leadership has a significant impact on student achievement, manifested primarily through the resulting actions of teachers. By shifting focus from influencing singular teacher actions through individual classroom observations to increased involvement in and supervision of teacher teams, principals can have greater impact on the actions of teachers and as a result, student learning. Working collaboratively with teacher teams, principals can make better use of one of the scarcest resources available to them—their time. ▣

Kurtis Hewson, a former principal, is on the education faculty at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada.

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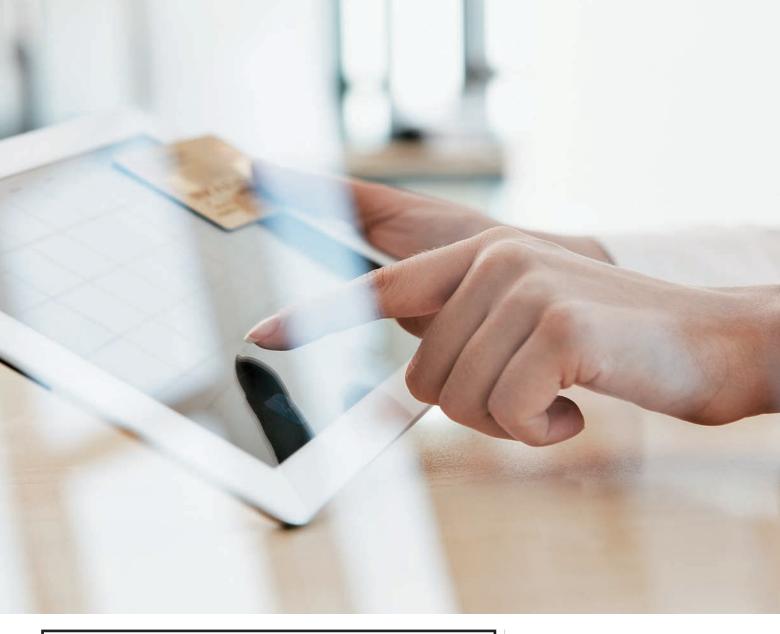
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