

A Collaborative Learning Culture

Effective schools have experienced, creative, and innovative educators who do great things for students. However, even in schools with effective communities of collaboration, there are often untapped opportunities for shared learning and professional growth. At Frances C. Richmond Middle School in Hanover, New Hampshire, we spent last school year shifting our focus and efforts to learning with one another. We hoped to open our classrooms; create systems of regular, high-quality feedback; and deliver targeted professional development. Simply put, we looked to leverage the talent we already had and strengthen our culture of collaboration—all with the result of improving our educational program for our students.

Offer Choices

One approach for developing a collaborative learning culture was rethinking our in-service time. For our fall and spring in-service days, we heard from staff that it was important to include choice, which would create opportunities for teachers to share their expertise and experience, and allow for staff to give and receive feedback.

Our fall in-service theme focused on effective technology-integration practices. Our time together was structured in a conference model, where staff across our school administrative unit and in other local Vermont and New Hampshire schools presented sessions on topics of interest around technology-integration best practices. Staff chose four sessions to attend and spent the day interacting with and learning from one another.

The success of this day stemmed from providing staff with a chance to choose the professional development that best fit their needs, and also creating an opportunity for staff who were willing and interested to share their practice and receive feedback. Staff surveys indicate that 91 percent of staff said it was a worthwhile use of in-service time. In fact, participant feedback included requests for a few longer sessions so there would be more time to play and practice with the content and materials presented.

Include Feedback

Our spring in-service day had a slightly different format. It was building-based and focused more specifically on the practice of giving and receiving feedback, while also sharing more about what we do at Richmond Middle School. Teachers voluntarily signed up to present mini sessions, approximately 45 minutes long, where they either shared an area of focus or a question and then debriefed to receive feedback from colleagues; or presented student work and sought specific feedback from staff.

Lesson and feedback topics included “How can you teach a high-interest, playful lesson and have kids come away with sound science learning?” and “We will model a ‘SBAC Technology of the Future’ lesson and then seek your feedback on both the classroom activity process and our lesson/teaching.”


The topics of the sessions where staff shared student work and asked for specific feedback included “comparing math comprehension across grade levels or feedback on an assessment,” “looking at rubrics in English class,” and “collaborating during the research process: the student and teacher expedition.”

Teachers chose sessions when they arrived in the morning and then “voted with their feet” by attending sessions that were most relevant or interesting to them. Because of

this, two sessions did not fill and, unfortunately, teachers prepared a lesson that they did not deliver. The outcome of this structure was that teachers attended professional development that was connected with their individual goals. The feedback again indicated that teachers appreciated the opportunity to guide their own professional development and the chance to learn from and with their peers.

The majority of participants (69 percent) reported that the format of the session was “very effective.” “I really enjoyed the mini lessons and feedback sessions,” said one participant. “I thought they were helpful in giving insight into what others are teaching, but also in thinking about ways to apply my teaching knowledge to different topics, subjects, and situations.”

Our colleagues are incredibly talented, interesting educators and we have refocused our attention on making the most of what we can learn from one another. Changing the model of our in-service days is just one of the ways we are listening to and encouraging staff to share what they do and to ask for feedback from their colleagues.

Fostering a collaborative culture is about establishing relationships, and like all relationships they require consistent attention and new experiences to deepen the connection. This school year we will continue and expand our partnership with staff as we plan and deliver professional development that is engaging and relevant. 

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