

THE LEARNING System

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF DISTRICT LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

Bargaining time

Union contract spells out how and when professional learning will happen

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

The times they are a-changin' in Carman-Ainsworth Community Schools in Flint, Mich.

Like most districts, Carman-Ainsworth used to provide a smorgasbord of professional development activities that teachers were encouraged, but not required, to join. There was little effort to align what teachers learned with what students needed. And little time was provided for teacher learning during the workday. Teachers largely learned what they wanted to learn and on their own time, subject primarily to state requirements for certification.

Now, Carman-Ainsworth is a district undergoing professional development reform. "We've had a cultural shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning," said teachers' union president Linda Wainio.

The district is still a work in progress but its story of change is instructive, especially because the teachers' union has been instrumental in shaping the new face of professional learning.

Overall, the district professional development has become more job-embedded, results-driven, and standards-based. Every Wednesday morning, every student in the 5,400-student district begins school an hour later so teachers can meet with colleagues, either in grade-level or subject-area learning teams. Teachers begin work 15 minutes earlier than usual on Wednesdays, creating

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Contract spells out time for professional learning

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Learn about Carman-Ainsworth High School's experience with school-based learning teams in the May 2007 issue of *The Learning Principal*.

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a 75-minute block of learning time once a week. (Teachers still have 53 or 55 minutes a day for personal planning time.) The district now has about 100 school-based learning teams. In addition to those teams, principals also meet in their own districtwide learning team during their administrative meetings. All of this time is counted as professional development time.

The district's evaluation instrument focuses on a teacher's professional growth and teachers identify personal learning goals and the criteria that will measure their success in achieving those goals. The district also created positions for several instructional specialists and coaches who work with teachers in literacy and math.

The new approach to professional development was made possible in large part because the Carman-Ainsworth Education Association and the district shifted to an interest-based bargaining model rather than the traditional adversarial model as they bargained the 2004-07 contract.

TEAM TIME

The district's 2000-03 contract was the first contract that provided time for teachers to meet as teams. That time was provided as five half days during the school year. "But there were no parameters or guidelines to really describe teaming. Teaming was whatever teachers interpreted that to be. Sometimes, they were simply sitting in the same room developing lessons independently and occasionally conversing with each other," said Dave Swierpel, director of professional development and community services and a graduate of the NSDC Academy.

That contract also stipulated that principals would have five hours of staff meetings during the school year. Again, few guidelines were in place to govern those meetings.

About that time, Swierpel and Paul Robinson, director of research and assessment, returned from their first NSDC Academy meeting filled with new ideas and a deeper understanding about quality professional development. They had a vision for professional development that

would be more closely tied to district initiatives, less event-driven, and more collaborative.

In the new NCLB era, principals were told that they would be accountable for improvements in their buildings. Swierpel and others questioned whether it was appropriate to "hold someone accountable when you only give them five hours a year to have face-to-face leadership with their entire staff."

At the same time, teachers were unhappy about a requirement to acquire 18 hours of professional development outside the school day, even though teachers had wide discretion about what they could study. "Those 18 hours could be in virtually anything. But that was a pain for them and it was a chore for the district to track all of that. We went building to building just trying to describe the process of counting hours. It was very challenging," Swierpel said.

At the bargaining table in 2004, using interest-based bargaining for the first time, the teachers' union and Carman-Ainsworth administration agreed that they shared an interest in high-quality professional development for all members of the staff. Swierpel brought to the table what he and Robinson had been learning about quality professional development. "We knew that it was based around real work and that it should be collaborative. It was clear that we could use all of that time and put it into something that was much more powerful than what we had," he said.

That led the bargaining team to examine the principal-led staff meetings and the 18 hours of required professional development as a package of time.

Teachers rejected the first tentative agreement that emerged from interest-based bargaining, partly because they didn't like the changes in the calendar but also partly out of reaction to the new style of bargaining, said union president Wainio. So the bargaining team went back to the table.

The bargainers next proposed 80-minute schoolwide staff meetings before or after school once a month which would be led by the principal

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and were expected to focus on professional learning. Attendance was mandatory.

The new contract also made another significant change. For the first time, Carman-Ainsworth created a districtwide Professional Development Committee comprised of teachers and administrators. That committee oversees the district's professional development, ensuring that it is tied to NSDC's Standards for Staff Development and other key indicators of quality professional learning.

This time, teachers approved the contract.

MIXED RESULTS, MORE CHANGE

The first year of schoolwide PD meetings got mixed results. Expecting teachers to be at their best after a long day of teaching was expecting too much. Meeting after school was also a hardship for teachers with young children. "The meetings became controversial because they raised questions like what happens if somebody misses it? What if a teacher is sick? Does she have to make up that time? If so, how does she do that? The whole record keeping was awful. It was more hassle than it was worth. But that was our best thinking at the time and we negotiated that into the contract. There were some pros to it but there were more cons than pros," Wainio said.

Both sides agreed to go back to the bargaining table even though there was still a year to run in the contract.

During those discussions, both sides agreed that creating a late start every Wednesday at every school would address several issues. Teachers would not be worn out by the time they started this important work. Teachers' childcare concerns would be reduced since teams would be meeting during the regular work day. External grant support was tapped to provide activities for elementary and middle school students, thus warding off a potential parent concern.

The new agreement went back to teachers for a vote since it involved a change in the calendar. Teachers liked the new option and approved the mid-year contract change.

LATE STARTS

The district learned to do some things differently with late starts. Teams have explicit instructions to create team norms, look at student work, develop common assessments, and develop goals. Each team must fill out a learning log which is reviewed weekly by a building administrator. Principals and central office administrators do walk-throughs during team meetings and instructional time. At each districtwide administrative meeting, principals are expected to talk about what's occurring in their schools.

Although it's early in the process, school-based learning teams seem to be winning over teachers. A survey of teachers in January revealed that teachers value the opportunities they have to work closely with colleagues and believe their teams are effective, that talking with their colleagues is important, and that such interaction has a positive impact on student achievement.

This spring, Carman-Ainsworth is bargaining again, working on its next contract. "We really want to institutionalize how we build time into the school day for teacher learning. I don't want us to take a step back. I don't want to go back to events. I want to fuse it all together and solidify that this is the way we operate," Swierpel said.

Union president Wainio said one of the greatest challenges is communicating the big picture. "If our end in mind is professional learning focused on results, the improved learning of all students and the creation of high-quality relationships between adults and high-quality relationships between adults and students, we have to help people understand where we're going."

For her part, she wants the union to play a significant role in creating that future. But that's part of the struggle as well. "Collaboration is suspect in many circles. Some of our constituents would prefer that it stays us and them. We have to model that it really is for the benefit of everyone to work in a collaborative way," she said. ■

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