

ASKING YOUR SCHOOL BOARD FOR TEACHER COLLABORATION TIME

You are coming out from behind your classroom doors and working together in exciting new ways. You are integrating curriculum, making it more meaningful and relevant for kids. You are talking with each other about individual students. You are looking at student work together, as a way to analyze and improve teacher practices.

Teacher collaboration is a huge shift for a profession that for years was almost completely private. But you are stepping out because you know that building a true professional learning community that includes ongoing, on-site, on-task dialogue is one of the surest ways to improve student achievement.

You also know teacher collaboration takes time. Finding that time, at least in today's industrial education model, can be challenging. But you are committed, and like school staffs around the country, you are going to your school board with your request for time.

What follows are some suggestions to consider when you are preparing to ask your school board for collaboration time.

Following these suggestions won't necessarily guarantee success, of course. You may put together a dynamite presentation and be prepared for every question you are asked, and still have your request denied. But you won't be caught unprepared and you will know you've done your homework.

Get clear about how much support your request will have from your district office

You won't get a spot on the board agenda without district approval. But just getting on the agenda doesn't necessarily mean the promise of strong support. District leaders have different styles and different ways of working with their boards. Some may be willing to let their schools ask for whatever they need but let the responsibility for persuasion rest on the school. Others are unlikely to let you ask unless they are almost certain you will get a "yes." Some will do a lot of groundwork before your request with their boards; others won't. Try to get some clarity about this beforehand.

Understand the competing pressures placed on school board members

Teachers want more time to collaborate. Administrators need to follow state guidelines. Parents want their kids in school. All these groups will lobby board members—over the phone, in the grocery store, on the soccer field. In truth, many boards would love to grant teachers more collaboration time, but they've got to be sure that time will improve student learning and they've got to sell the community.

Find out what kinds of requests have been presented to the board in the last five or ten years

If you are relatively new, either to your school or to teacher leadership, find out the history of teacher collaboration time in your building or district. Has the school made frequent requests that have been rejected? Why? Has time been given and then taken away because it wasn't well used? If requests have been made, how did parents react? Doing this homework will help you develop a better presentation strategy.

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Keep your teachers' union well informed

Understand how your request will affect your teachers contract. In fact, if putting together a request for collaboration time is a committee task, it's a good idea to have a union leader as part of your group.

Be able to describe how teacher collaboration time differs from more traditional kinds of staff development

In the past, professional development often took place outside of schools. Teachers sat in hotels or district conference rooms and listened to experts. Today, most educators understand that effective professional development (the kind that improves student learning) is generally site-based, long-term, and directly related to teachers' practice. It's an ongoing part of a teacher's work week, not something tacked on. Although many board members understand this, you should be prepared to describe how this shift in thinking is supported by data and by the public's rising concern for accountability.

Outline as clearly and specifically as possible what teachers would be doing during collaboration time

Will your teachers be spending the time integrating curriculum? Looking at student work and teacher practice? Talking about students you share? Developing advisories? Participating in Critical Friends Groups? Making decisions about the operation of your new small school? If you don't know how you will be using collaboration time (you're just sure you need more of it), go back to the drawing board.

Be able to show how these collaboration activities translate into improved student learning

If you are a new small school or academy, your faculty has lots of operating decisions to make. How and when will you run your advisories? What kind of decision-making model will you choose? And so on. These are important discussions, but activities that focus directly on teaching and learning have more impact on student achievement. The big question for a school board has to be: how will *students* benefit?

Outline the accountability measures you will put into place and how you will share results with the board

Your board may ask how you intend to ensure teacher accountability for collaboration, so be ready to describe what you will do. How will you document the time used and the teachers involved? How will you measure outcomes or results? Put a mechanism in place for reporting back to the board. Making your work public is a way to build trust and ensure that you'll get time the following year.

Be clear about whether or not your request will result in lost instructional time

Add it up and put it out there. Even if you are ready to make the argument that a little less (but higher quality) instructional time is better than more and poorer instruction, begin by being upfront about lost time. Know whether or not the time you are requesting will require your district to ask for a waiver. You can learn more at the Small Schools website, <http://www.smallschoolsproject.org/index.asp?siteloc=start§ion=waivers>

Briefly describe time options you considered

Some parents and community members think kids are never in school. They may have no idea how LID days or teacher-prep days are used; it just seems there are too many of them. List the days you currently have. Could you use some for on-site teacher collaboration activities? Who would you have to ask?

Explain why you chose the option you did, giving both its pros and cons

For example, if you ask for late arrivals, you can cite the research on teenagers' sleep patterns, but you should also be ready to address transportation issues. If you are asking for early dismissals, prepare to discuss how this will impact after-school activities, bussing, etc. Know what the recommended option will cost. Suggest ways to minimize expense increases.

Be specific about ways in which your request, if granted, will impact student life

Will more or fewer kids be able to participate in extra-curricular activities? Will there be instances of kids feeling like something has been taken away from them? If so, what benefits will they receive?

Here are a variety of "finding time" options some districts use; your board will probably expect you to have considered some of them:

- Offer early release.
- Offer late arrival.
- "Bank" time.
- Extend the school day slightly so that one day a month there is a full day of planning time (attached to a weekend, so that there is a three-day weekend for the students).
- Schedule team teaching in a way that frees up some teachers for a chunk of time.
- Implement an internship program. For example, one day a week, half the students might be out on internships in the morning and half in the afternoon. While students are out, half the faculty plans, then the schedule switches in the afternoon.
- Get permission to use district PD days.
- Adopt a schedule that includes common planning time.
- Free up teachers by scheduling large school activities such as assemblies or field trips that require fewer staff or can use community volunteers.

Consider suggesting ways for your school to stay open during collaboration time

Community members worry about having high school kids on the streets during traditional school hours. Parents worry about teens' extra hours at home. Given these concerns, you may want to consider finding ways to keep your school open during teacher collaboration time.

Be prepared to suggest some ways that—if time is granted—you will assist your board members to explain the change to parents and the community

Expect some of your board members to be concerned about parent and community reactions—reactions that may depend on the trust level among all the parties—community, board, district administration, teachers. Again, the more you make your work public with your board, the better able the board will be to respond to community concerns.

These tips were compiled with input from the Small Schools Project's Board Advisory Council, a group of sitting board members from Washington State school districts.

