

Meaningful Meetings

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Background That Led to Your Team's Inquiry:

Our district has gone through several changes in regards to professional development and school and district wide meetings. When I first came to our district, we had after school meetings every day, with the exception of Fridays. Teachers had a very negative attitude about professional development, in general, due to the amount of time they were spending in meetings. Regardless of the value, staff were unhappy to have to stay after school for such a significant amount of time and were not necessarily open to collaborating and working. The following year, we reduced the number of meetings to just two a month using early release time, so that teachers were not having to stay after on their own time. While this improved the climate, it made it difficult to fit everything in that we needed to cover. We were now dealing with less time but the same amount of content and professional development to cover. Therefore, the purpose of our action research was to make our professional development with staff meaningful and productive in the short time that we had.

Statement of Your Team's Wondering:

With this purpose, our team wanted to be able to utilize the little amount of professional development time we did have each month to make the most gains while maintaining a positive and collaborative environment focused on student achievement.

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into our wonderings, we looked at what we could do to first make meetings something people looked forward to and valued. Using Marzano as a framework and restructuring the overall layout of the meetings, we began to make changes. We started each meeting with an ice breaker or fun game that tied into what we were doing or focusing on that day. We set group norms at the first meeting and regularly assessed how well the norms were being followed with feedback from staff. We utilized different staff members to present and share information, as well as met in different classrooms. Equally significant, we took a look at what we needed to do to move forward as a school. We then decided to revisit our school vision and looked at what we really believe and expect from ourselves, our students, and our community. We then used that vision as a guide for aligning our vocabulary and instructional strategies for teaching vocabulary across the grade levels.

The biggest part of our data collection involved the work itself. We set tasks for each meeting and made sure we completed the tasks and would summarize where we were at as we finished up each meeting. We also discussed how what we completed would tie into our next step. Another part of our data collection was the group norm sheet. We had 5 different people each meeting complete the group norm sheet. Each person sent it to our team and we would put it into a document and share it at the beginning of each meeting.

Stating Your Team's Learning and Supporting it with Data:

As a result of analyzing our data, some important things we learned include: 1) When teachers can see the big picture and know what they're working towards and how it fits together, they are more willing to put in the time to accomplish a task; 2) Staff greatly appreciated having a couple of minutes to grab a snack and laugh as they played a quick game or ice breaker before we got into the meat of our PD; 3) We all need accountability. Knowing that five of the staff members were reflecting on each meeting and providing feedback made staff a little bit more accountable for their actions. The first two times we shared the results of the group norms, "side bar conversations" and "time on task" were areas that needed improvement. Before we started I reviewed that with staff and we made that a goal to improve on for the next meeting. After just the second meeting, it improved dramatically, knowing that your colleague is going to be evaluating what you're doing puts a little bit of pressure on you to make sure you're doing what you need to do.

With the professional development meetings coming at the last hour of the day, teachers are tired from teaching for seven hours. Their minds have been focused on instruction and they haven't had a chance to decompress before we are jumping into something else. Taking just ten minutes to stop, rest, and have fun with a quick snack helped put everyone in a much better mood and you could see their demeanor change from when they first arrived to when we started. It became a much more relaxed environment, with teachers more open and sharing and collaborative.

It was also evident from the work completion that we were actually accomplishing more by narrowing down the tasks. We were always in a rush to try and get everything done, but by slowing down and focusing on what was most important, we were able to dig deeper and get more done. Each meeting, we would hear comments like "Oh my gosh, I can't believe I never realized how much time I spend on just that standard!" and "I wish we had done this earlier in the year because this would have helped me for ISTEP." I received an email from one teacher after our first meeting that said, "I so enjoyed having just the few minutes to stop, breathe, and eat! The day goes by so quickly and I never even have a chance to catch my breathe and say hi to my colleagues. It was so nice to be able to sit for just a few minutes, enjoy some chocolate, and play a fun game, which I plan on using in my math stations next week!" We had a few of those comments and again, just giving a few minutes up at the beginning of the meeting helped us get a bigger bang for our buck.

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

While sometimes things seem obvious and are staring you right in the face, you just don't realize how important they really are. Everyone likes a chance to eat, chat, and have fun. When people are in a good mood, they are more likely to be productive. Teaching is an exhausting job and staff need time to decompress before jumping into another task. As a team, we realized the importance of making sure everyone was in the right frame of mind to work and learn. We also realized the importance of having an objective and focus. We have learning objectives in the classroom for kids and it's just as important to have a focus for adults so we can see what we're responsible for doing and learning.

References:

Marzano, R., & Warrick, P. (2014). High Reliability Schools. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.