

Getting Up and Running Quickly

Ten Things School Leaders Can Do

The following list is a concise overview of ten critical leverage points that schools leaders should address when designing an effective professional learning and planning program.

1. Get up to speed: research common planning time and professional learning communities, learn what successful collaboration looks like in practice, determine your faculty's professional development needs and priorities, and map out the assets you have and the obstacles that stand in your way. Your professional planning time strategy should be based on sound research, hard data, and objectively determined needs.
2. Create a teacher leadership team that extends beyond the typical department-head structure. Empower this team to lead an inclusive effort to develop a shared vision for professional learning and planning, and to design and implement professional learning time that is focused on increasing faculty collaboration, designing high-impact curricula, incorporating research-based instructional strategies, and developing personalized interventions.
3. Develop a communication plan that clearly and articulately outlines the rationale, vision, and expectations for collaborative learning and planning in your school. Explicitly align the plan with school and district goals, and articulate how resources will be allocated—or reallocated—to support the program.
4. Meet with the superintendent, school board, union leaders, and other influential decision makers early in the process to discuss the school's strategic goals, build support for collaborative professional planning time, and review policy, budgetary, and contractual implications. Identify potential roadblocks early on and work to eliminate them.
5. Recruit a cadre of motivated teacher-leaders, train them in effective group-facilitation skills, and empower them to create a job-embedded professional learning and planning model that is aligned with the school's fundamental organizational structures—departments, teams, academies, content areas, or grade levels. The most effective planning teams foster a sense of shared purpose by mirroring the structures of the school and bringing together staff members and teachers who share students, roles, or an academic discipline.
6. Work to nurture a culture of trust, safety, and transparency among the faculty by, for example, modeling collaborative leadership, recognizing and rewarding good work, empowering teachers to lead curriculum design and instructional improvement, challenging negative attitudes, and adopting a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to negative or harmful comments about students.
7. Provide teachers with real-life exemplars of effective professional collaboration: case studies, site visits to other schools to observe high-impact professional planning time in action, or visiting teachers who can speak articulately and persuasively about how professional collaboration transformed their school, for example. Learn from the best models, but customize the program to address your school's needs.
8. Make sure that collaborative professional development remains intensively focused on improving instructional practice—analyzing student data, critiquing teacher work, designing lessons, or developing interventions, for example. Effective professional development affirms the value and expertise of individual teachers, while harnessing the collective wisdom of the faculty.
9. Identify the voices most likely to derail the work. Sabotage cannot be an option. Boldly and clearly express your vision for the school: equity and student needs come first. Create opportunities for teachers to lead, and find authentic roles for naysayers. While some people may not be trailblazers or innovators, everyone can play a role. It may take more time for some teachers to embrace peer leadership, facilitation, or the sharing of their work. Begin with the motivated early adopters and nurture buy-in over time.
10. Secure adequate funding and resources: identify all available funding (federal, state, local) to support professional development, pursue grants, reallocate time or human resources, or phase out dated or less successful programs. Reconfigure to reprioritize. Find new and more creative ways to focus school resources where they are needed most.