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Principals Share "Best Meetings of the Year"

All it takes is one waste-of-time meeting to give all staff meetings a bad name. That's why we asked our "Principal Files" team to share a meeting that went exceptionally well. You're sure to find an idea or two here to pump up the value of meetings in your school.

How successful are your staff meetings? Do some go over with a bang? Others with a thud? Creating staff meetings that are truly valuable, motivate teachers, and lead to improved student achievement is the goal of every principal. That's why we asked our Principal Files Team to share their most successful meetings of the past school year. There are no "thuds" here!

GREAT MEETINGS START ON DAY ONE

Great staff meetings start on the first day of the new school year. That's when principal Pat Green introduces two activities that help to set the tone.

One of the more tedious tasks at the start of the school year is the time spent "reviewing the rules of the road" and "reaffirming the nuts and bolts" related to a host of issues from attendance to safety, Green told Education World. "Giving out the handbook and highlighting a few things gets really boring," said Green, who is principal at Cedar Heights Junior High School in Port Orchard, Washington. "So last year I tried building the competitive spirit among my teachers by playing 'Handbook Jeopardy'."

Green's game actually combined elements of several popular game shows. She created teams of three or four teachers to be "on stage." She appointed other groups to serve as a panel of experts and as "lifelines." Prior to playing the game, Green prepared questions to highlight important handbook information in categories such as Paperwork, Teaching Techniques, and SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures).

Sample "Handbook Jeopardy" Questions Paperwork: "Why is accurate attendance important?" or "You want to take a field trip with your class. What do you need to do prior to the trip?" SOPs: "If you want to show a film to your students that is rated PG-13 or R, what must you do beforehand?" or "If you suspect that a report to Children's Services is needed, what do you do?"

Players select a category and a dollar amount; the higher dollar values are assigned to more difficult -- or more important -- questions. Teams are allowed to discuss a question before giving the judges their best response. If the judges determine that response is incorrect, the opposing team gets a chance to buzz in and answer. Clarification of each correct response is briefly given and then the next team gets to select a category and dollar amount.

"Handbook Jeopardy might take a little more time than a simple page-by-page review of the handbook," said Green, "but the game format enables us to review the most important information in a fun and friendly way. The energy of the game helps build a sense of team.

"And, obviously, prizes -- such as bags of Jolly Ranchers to use as student rewards -- go to the winners."

A TIME FOR GOAL SETTING

Another activity Pat Green used last September was aimed at capitalizing on the excitement, energy, and new ideas with which many teachers start the school year. She gives each staff member a sheet of paper, a pen, and a legal-size envelope. She asks them to write down three goals they have for themselves for the year. She asks them to write one goal they really want to accomplish in the area of home/parent communication; one personal-wellness goal; and one colleague-support goal. Teachers and other staff members write their goals and seal them in their envelopes. They then write their names on the outside of the envelopes.

"I keep the envelopes -- unopened -- in my office until the start of the second half of the year," explained Green. "Then I bring them out again and ask the staff to review their three goals and consider what they've done to accomplish them. I have them note actions they hope to take toward their goals in the second half of the year."

The envelopes get sealed up again and pulled out at the end of the school year for individuals to review.

"This approach gives staff a chance to set goals, get re-focused mid-year, and then review their commitment at the end of the year," said Green. "I never read the goals or the notes about progress, but I use this tool as one way to help folks keep themselves focused and accountable for three positive things."

MAKING TIME TO LEARN AND TALK

Many principals use the first meetings of the year to help them establish and cement a yearlong focus. At Avery Elementary School in Webster Groves, Missouri, Six Traits of Writing was to be the school's focus last year. That focus started on the first day of school, said [former] principal Lolli Haws. "We started our planning based on the belief that we have much to learn from the 'experts' teaching in our own building," she said. "Teachers met twice each month -- once for an hour and once for an entire afternoon -- with grade-level (primary or intermediate) colleagues. The themes for each meeting were structured around topics such as looking at Six Traits resources, sharing writing ideas, discussing Six Traits literature, and practicing how to use the program's rubrics to score students' writing."

At the start of the year, teachers had many different ideas about what makes quality writing. Their expectations and their evaluation procedures were all over the park. "By year's end," Haws said, "each teacher had a very good idea of exemplary, quality writing expectations for their own grade.

"During the year they all kept notebooks full of ideas. They had time to share, laugh, discuss, and learn from one another. Best of all, data showed tremendous growth in virtually every student's writing ability from our fall to spring writing assessments.

"The key was having time to learn and talk with each other!" concluded Haws. "As we plan for continued growth next year, that is a component of their learning they will not be willing to let go!"

A YEARLONG FOCUS

At Collins Lane Elementary School in Frankfort, Kentucky, principal Jeffrey Castle led his staff through a yearlong focus on analyzing student work. "Each teacher took a turn to present a piece of writing, an open response question and student answer, or a student project," said Castle. "Teachers reviewed student work and analyzed it. They talked about the kinds of feedback they might give students and how they might improve their own instruction to result in better student work."

As teachers worked together to develop common assessment practices, this experience became a real community builder, Castle added.

Student assessment is just one element of Castle's determination to bring the Professional Learning Communities approach to life at Collins Lane Elementary. "I had spent three years developing a climate focused on student learning, and I was ready to take the leap into leading our staff into a session focused on developing statements of our school-wide mission, vision, and commitment," Castle told Education World. "Once we developed those statements, they were blown up into posters and hung in all classrooms and hallways.

"That session was one of the most miraculous in which I have ever participated. Giving teachers time to discuss their views about what they are in school for, why they teach, and what they are committed to was a real bonding experience."

KUDOS COMMENT CONTRIBUTIONS, CATAPULT CAMARADERIE

At The Wellington School in Columbus, Ohio, Ken Rogers is the head of the middle school. "Every staff meeting begins with a listing of some of the good things that have happened in school recently," explained Rogers. "The 'Kudos' section of our meetings even appears right at the top of the meeting agenda! Kudos might be handed out for the band's latest concert, an art show, a successful service-learning project, or someone who has just finished an advanced degree."

Rogers keeps an envelope in the main office with Kudos note cards next to it. "Teachers nominate each other based on work they have done to make our school a better place. Notes say things such as Ms. D. has such a great sense of humor with kids or Mr. J. did an excellent job introducing the new math program on Parents' Night. Most of the cards are anonymous. I read aloud all of them. Then I draw a random card. The person noted on that card is the recipient of the a plastic school bus, which gets displayed in his or her classroom until the next meeting."

The school bus award is affectionately known around Wellington as the "Rosa" award because it celebrates "on the bus" behaviors and spirit, Rogers explained .

"We have several other traveling prizes," added Rogers, "like a kitchen fire extinguisher that goes to someone who has spent time 'putting out fires' and a full-size shovel that we painted gold. The Golden Shovel award goes to the faculty member who has been well you can figure that one out. Every time someone gets the shovel, they get to sign it."

SOLVING BEHAVIOR ISSUES... TOGETHER

When everybody on the team focuses on an issue, success is almost guaranteed. Even if that issue is student discipline!

Principal David Christensen knew it would take a consistent approach to address the discipline issues he heard teachers complaining about at Wirreanda Public School in Medowie, New South Wales (Australia). Teachers' concerns were all over the board; the students wouldn't cooperate, they weren't doing the work or following instructions... "While the complaints weren't from all staff, they were loud enough to start to affect the climate of the school," said Christensen. So, at one staff meeting, he set the wheels in motion.

"We began the meeting by focusing on the behaviors that 'cheesed us off' most," Christensen explained. "Each teacher listed five behaviors on [sticky notes]. I collected the notes and we grouped them on the windows in the room.

"Little by little, a pattern emerged. Teachers, it seemed, were less concerned about the most serious discipline issues. They were much more concerned about lower-level issues that disrupted the classroom and others' learning.

"We put the identified behaviors in priority order. This helped us see that all the things we were concerned about weren't necessarily serious enough to require capital punishment.

"Our next step was to discuss each group of behavior problems and assign a key word or value to it. We came up with four 'key values' -- responsibility, respect, persistence, and pride.

"Staff then considered how we could all use those key values in dealing with discipline issues in the classroom and on the playground. We agreed that when confronted with an incident, we would all use similar phrases relating to the four key values. Soon the school halls echoed with teachers asking questions such as Were you showing respect when you ....? or Were you showing responsibility when you ....?

"We reinforced those values in a wide variety of other ways too -- through our parent newsletter, at school assemblies, and in our classrooms."

Christensen feels that teachers now approach student discipline with much greater consistency. And he hears much less complaining in the staff room too.

"Solving all our discipline problems will be a long process, but I feel we have taken a good first step," added Christensen.

"BEST PRACTICES" ARE THE BEST MEETINGS

"The most beneficial meetings are those that are based on "Best Practices," principal Ernest Elliott told Education World. "We hosted a 'best-practices' session during one of our planned 'late-start' days. At that meeting, five staff members shared approaches that worked for them to increase student achievement. The presentations ranged from one teacher who shared a unique approach to preparing students for state writing assessments to a math teacher who shared her no-homework policy."

"It is very refreshing for teachers to see how other staff approach their subject responsibilities, and the level of success that each approach brings," added Elliott.

Principal Teri Stokes of Weatherly Heights Elementary, Huntsville, Alabama, concurs with Elliott's view. "Teachers indicate that workshops coworkers have given in our school have been very valuable. That's because they are usually focused on reality, not theory."

"TEAM LEADERS" AND A "TEACHER SWAP"

Sometimes the hard work of meeting with teachers can be accomplished in a "different" way. At Providence Day School in Charlotte, North Carolina, principal Tim Messick holds monthly meetings with his school's "team leaders," or grade level chairs. "Our team leaders are an integral part of our leadership plan," explained Messick. "We realized that in order for meetings to be productive we needed to set a meeting time when folks would be at a positive place in their day -- a time when they would be able to be receptive to new ideas and possible changes, actively participate in discussions, and make important decisions. That's why we hold our monthly meetings at 1:00 in the afternoon."

Subs or teacher assistants cover the team leaders' classes; and lunch is provided for the meeting's participants. Team leaders are responsible for sharing information about the team-leader meetings and leading discussions about important issues with the other members of their teams.

That doesn't mean the rest of the staff is off the hook when it comes to meetings. The faculty works in a variety of groupings to address issues and improve the school and its curriculum. "Sometimes teachers work within their grade-level teams and other times they work in vertical teams with colleagues from other grade-levels," said Messick. "I try to make it a priority in meetings that the faculty is engaged, not always talked at."

One especially good meeting last year took place on the day most teachers participated in a "Teacher Swap." The Teacher Swap happened on a midweek midwinter day. "I encouraged teachers to swap with another teacher -- preferably two levels above or below -- and spend the morning teaching that grade."

On the appointed day, teachers went to their new classes and performed the duties and taught the classes of their colleagues. "At the end of the day, we had a faculty meeting for the teachers who participated," said Messick. "Teachers broke into small groups and shared their experiences. Most revealing was the renewed appreciation among participants for the hard work and uniqueness of the demands of another grade level. The 'grass is always greener' adage was quickly dispelled by this experience.

"Some teachers even became excited about considering the possibility of trying another grade in a year of two. Others were more convinced than ever that they love the age they currently teach.

"It was an enthusiastic afternoon of wonderful sharing, support, and appreciation for work that colleagues do on a regular basis."

Due to popular demand, the Teacher Swap will become an annual event, said Messick. Next year he might encourage teachers to swap in the opposite direction from which they moved this year. He also expressed interest in the possibility that at some time his staff might try a similar experiment with the middle or high school teachers who are fed students from Providence Day School.

PRINCIPALS TEAM UP FOR EMPHASIS

In Lancaster, Ohio, two principals -- Paul Young and Jeromey Sheets -- recently teamed up to use their grant monies to bring team-trainer Margaret Searle aboard. Searle led teachers toward developing a user-friendly document that would enable teachers to frequently assess students based on state indicators, said Young. "Teachers developed curriculum maps with differentiated assessments that enable all students, including those with disabilities, to demonstrate their learning and mastery of the standards."

Teachers can use the documents to determine which students need additional help and what teaching strategies might be used to meet the individual needs of each child, added Young.

Teachers became so excited about this curriculum analysis and mapping that they voluntarily extended their work time on the project before and after school and into their spring vacations. Regular classroom teachers and special education teachers worked closely together. They shared the results of their efforts at a district-wide in-service meeting. Currently, they are seeking approval of their assessments and curriculum maps for use in all schools.

By working together to create this document, teachers have ownership of the work and will continue to revise it, said Young. "Only by working together will we be able to live up to the task of leaving no child behind," he added.

GREAT SPEAKERS = GREAT MEETINGS

"Our district scheduled a staff development session for the day before Christmas break," recalled principal Ann Robison of Hannan Elementary Magnet School in Columbus, Georgia. "Many members of our staff were a bit upset that they had to attend a whole-day workshop that day."

But it worked beautifully because the speaker, Dr. Marcia Tate, and the topic -- Worksheets Don't Grow Dendrites -- were so engaging.

"At the end of the day, everybody was so thankful that we brought Dr. Tate to our school," said Robison. It also helped that the day began with a breakfast for the entire staff, and the PTA treated the entire staff to lunch at a wonderful Italian restaurant.

But the best was yet to come! After the holiday break, teachers began using the strategies that Dr. Tate introduced. "We did not have any office referrals for discipline for almost a month! And we have cut the use of worksheets in our school."

Principal Teri Stokes says some of the best sessions she has led also included great speakers. Most memorable was a session led by David Sousa, author of books that include How the Brain Learns; How the Gifted Brain Learns; and How the Special Needs Brain Learns.

MORE PRACTICAL POINTERS FROM PRINCIPALS

* Ken Rogers presents teachers with an agenda for each staff meeting at least two or three days before the meeting. "At the bottom of the agenda is a section I call "Stuff You Can Just Read," said Rogers. "That way, we don't spend time during the meeting reading announcements."
* "At the beginning of each staff meeting, we sing 'Happy Birthday' to all the teachers who have a birthday that month," said Larry Davis.
* Book studies are a particularly valuable form of professional development. "When we can't afford books, we read a compilation of articles on a subject," said Teri Stokes. Finding articles on the Web is usually pretty easy, she added. ADHD and childhood asthma are two of the topics her teachers have recently discussed.
* Just like teachers work to design lessons for different learning styles, Stokes tries to plan staff meetings that appeal to a range of teachers' learning styles. "Any meeting gets boring and frustrating for those of us who are ADHD if there is not time built in for movement or time to reflect on and respond to what is being presented," she said. "Well thought-out handouts for visual learners are appreciated too."
* "I have made it a priority to have some type of food or snack at each of our meetings," said Tim Messick. "Many meetings are held at the end of the day when everybody is tired. I have found that bottled water and something to eat can help bring up the energy level and spirits."
* A different setting -- such as a restaurant -- can add a different perspective to a meeting. The first meeting of the past school year for the faculty of Central Fairmount School in Cincinnati, Ohio, was held off-site at a restaurant. "Teachers really appreciated not being in a hot school building," said assistant principal Bonita Henderson. On the last day of school, the faculty met at a different restaurant for a special celebration.