

Heidi Taylor-Eliopoulos: Teachers appreciate time to collaborate



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When I think back about my first years teaching, I realize how little I knew. I was 22 years old, fresh out of college and charged with the education of 300 students. I was a high school English teacher. It wasn't an easy job then; it isn't an easy job now. I struggled, but I believed if I just kept working hard, I would be able to make a difference. I came in early, stayed late, worked weekends. I was the most boring 22-year-old I knew.

When I needed to create assessments, I closed my door and wrote assessments that I thought would measure student progress. When I needed to plan activities, I closed my door and tried to come up with the most creative, engaging activities that I could. When I needed to figure out how to help a struggling learner, I closed my door and racked my brain to come up with a new approach to try.

Over and over, I closed my door. In my hallway, 13 other English teachers did the same thing. Four of us taught the same classes. In the school district, 27 other high school English teachers did the same thing. Eight of us taught the same classes. We worked in isolation to solve the same problems.

Looking back, I admit, it sounds a little silly.

The greatest minds in engineering firms, medical facilities and industry don't close their doors to work alone to plan for their new innovations — they collaborate. The most successful organizations don't close their doors to solve their most important problems — they collaborate. In education, too, we understand, more than ever, the need to collaborate.

Friday, Sept. 18, will be the first early release day for students in the Chippewa Falls Area Unified School District. Previously, the district participated in late-start days. The early release days this year replace the late starts from previous years.

Thank you for this gift of time. We realize that anytime we alter the normal routine of our school schedule, we cause families and the community to make alternate arrangements. We appreciate your doing this to give our staff the time to learn and develop together, for the benefit of students.

Because you are giving us this important time, I would like to explain how we use it. On Friday, staff will start the afternoon by writing Student Learning Outcome goals. For this process, they begin by gathering information about their students' current learning. They consider where their students are in their progress right now and where they want them to be by the end of the year.

Teachers work together to write specific and measurable goals that describe the growth they want their students to make over the year. Then, they develop action steps they will take to meet the goal. They talk about how they will measure progress along the way to check whether they are on track to meet the goal by the end of the year. The purpose of this goal-setting is for teachers to work together to take a focused approach on student growth, narrowing in on the growth the students need the most.

After goal-setting, staff will continue their collaborative work on instructional units. The units are designed to be adjusted based on student learning needs. Teachers review the standards, picking them apart to clearly define targets for learning and skills.

They develop assessments (projects, demonstrations, labs, essays, tests) that measure when a student has mastered the skills. They set up activities for students to practice. They develop short checkpoints to give them feedback on how close students are getting to mastering the skills. They plan for adjustments that will be needed for students who need extra support or extra challenges. They review the results of their assessments and checkpoints to help them plan what to do next to stretch every child.

They also work together to brainstorm and problem solve. They know that they are stronger as a team than each one working simultaneously in isolation. After all, sometimes our best ideas aren't our own.

Having a school system that is truly student-centered and responsive to student learning needs requires time for teachers to engage in meaningful collaboration. Having time designated in the school calendar for this work to be done is invaluable. We sincerely appreciate the time and support our community provides us to be able to do this important work.

Halford Luccock said, "No one can whistle a symphony." Not only could we not do meaningful work without each other, but we certainly couldn't do it without the support of our community. From the Chippewa Falls Area Unified School District, please accept our sincerest appreciation for the gift of time.