



# USE TIME FOR FACULTY STUDY

By CARLENE U. MURPHY

**A**T JACKSON Elementary School in Greeley, Colorado, normal dismissal time is 3:25. But on Mondays the students leave at 1:45, and the teachers stay until 5 for staff development activities. For at least an hour during that time, all teachers and teaching aides attend study group meetings. These small groups – no more than six people – work on improving student writing in all content areas, which the whole faculty agreed should be a major focus for this year’s groups. Teachers put their heads together to examine classroom practice, and explore ways to improve it. They look at research, create and practice teaching activities, and examine student work together.

*Getting the whole faculty involved focuses a school*

Jackson is one of more than 150 schools using the Whole-Faculty Study Group process. In these schools, all certified staff belong to small groups that meet regularly to focus on student needs. This is a whole school change model that uses professional development as its central feature.

These schools say study groups are well worth the time devoted to them. They help teachers focus on teaching, coordinate and collaborate with colleagues, pass on experience, and develop a group understanding of the school and its ongoing mission.

### WHOLE-FACULTY STUDY GROUPS

All of the Whole-Faculty Study Group schools use the same data-based decision model (Murphy and Lick, 1998) to make decisions about how to organize study groups and what they will do. What their students need determines what teachers do in a particular study group. If students at an elementary school are not performing at the desired level in math, for example, that school's study groups could examine the math curriculum and how it is taught.

The program provides a decision-making cycle and process guidelines, which provide a format for organizing those discussions and ongoing support for study groups. All teachers assume leadership roles, usually on a rotating basis, and work together to teach all children in the school. This work can take many forms, but the guiding principles are always the



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same: Teachers need to continuously study and investigate teaching, and apply what they learn. When the study group process is focused on appropriate content, it changes what teachers and students do in classrooms.

Research conducted by Rosenholtz (1989), McLaughlin (1993), Little (1993) and Louis, Marks and Kruse (1996) tell us that how teachers interact when they are not in their classrooms is critical to the future of school restructuring and the effects of restructuring on students. Louis, Marks, and Kruse also confirm that the school's organization and the other faculty members and administrators who compose the school staff create a larger context that influences teachers' professional satisfaction.

### THE PROCESS GUIDELINES

The Whole-Faculty Study Group process is defined and governed by the following guidelines:

#### 1. Keep the size of the group to no more than six.

The larger the study group, the more difficult it is to find meeting times when all members can be present. Also, the larger the study group, the more likely the group will splinter into two groups. With smaller study groups, each member will participate more and take greater responsibility.

#### 2. Don't restrict the composition of the study group.

The homogeneity or heterogeneity of the study group is not a critical element. Study group members may have similar responsibilities (first grade teachers, mathematics teachers, or elementary principals) or very different responsibilities (across grade levels, across subject areas, or across schools or districts).

A study group is most often composed of those who want to pursue or investigate a specific student need that has been identified through an analysis of student data. Every study group member must be willing to give other members whatever is needed to be successful and

effective in classrooms. Members don't necessarily have to like each other or have any social contact outside of the study group.

#### 3. Establish and keep a regular schedule.

Weekly meetings, for about an hour, keep the momentum at a steady pace and give study group members ongoing learning and support systems. Faculties have been very creative in finding the time for study groups to meet (Murphy, 1997). Individuals should remain in the same study group for an entire school year, and that group should establish a regular meeting time. Groups have found that it's usually better to meet more frequently for shorter periods of time than to meet infrequently for a longer block of time. More than two weeks between meetings is too long to sustain momentum and to get regular feedback on classroom practice. An hour is the minimal meeting time and seems adequate to accomplish the intent of a given meeting.

#### 4. Establish group norms at the study group's first meeting.

Study group members should collectively agree on the behaviors that will facilitate the work of the group. Members may agree to begin and end on time, to take responsibility for one's own learning, to be an active participant, to respect each others' opinions and to bring to the meeting whatever is needed for the group to do the agreed-upon work. Study groups are encouraged to review the norms frequently.

#### 5. Agree on an action plan for the study group.

It's important that a study group develop its own action plan. If there are 10 study groups in the school, then there should be 10 action plans. The student needs may have been identified by a larger body, but how a study group will go about its investigation is for that group to decide. All of the action plans for all of the study groups in a school are made public, usually on clipboards in the faculty room.

### **STUDY GROUPS IN ACTION: JACKSON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, GREELEY, COLORADO**

This school year is the fourth that Jackson Elementary has used study groups. The previous spring, the whole faculty made two major decisions:

- Student writing, which a careful data analysis revealed as the number one student need, should be the focus of study group work for the following year; and
- The composition of the study groups would be “cross-grade.” Teachers from pre-kindergarten to fifth grade formed study groups, along with specialists covering music, reading, special education, technology, art, physical education, gifted and talented, and media for all grade levels.

The teachers formed eight study

groups and began working on ways to make students more successful writers in all content areas. One group composed of a kindergarten teacher, a first grade teacher, a third grade teacher, a fourth grade teacher and a reading teacher designed a study group action plan that focuses on writing in math. Study group work includes designing lessons, practice-teaching the lessons to each other, designing materials, examining student work, researching effective practices, and doing whatever else the group feels will give them the skill and the will to change their behaviors and their students’ behaviors in the classroom.

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Here’s a blueprint for an action plan along with examples for each element:

- The general category of student needs: reading.
- Specific student needs that the study group will address within that category: increase amounts of independent reading in all areas.
- The actions the group will take when the group meets to address the student needs: prepare annotated bibliographies, design strategies for book reports that cater to multiple intelligences, devise a reward system.
- Evidence that the intended results have been achieved: scores on vocabulary tests, circulation reports from the school media center and public library.
- What resources will be used: book lists, computer software, the Internet, student textbooks, media specialist, student work.

The action plan should be revisited at regular intervals and adjusted to be consistent with current actions. This takes on a higher level of importance when the group formally evaluates its progress toward intended results. If the intended

results for study group members and students aren’t appropriate or adequate, the evaluation will indicate that the group missed its targets.

#### **6. Focus on curriculum and instruction.**

What study groups actually do determines the worth of the process. The need for more challenging curriculum content for students means teachers will also have to learn more challenging curriculum content, and how to teach it (Loucks-Horsley, 1998). The content of any staff development approach should have promise for positive effects on student learning.

Study groups support the implementation of curricular and instructional innovations, integrate and give coherence to a school’s instructional practices and programs, target a schoolwide instructional need, and monitor the impact of instructional changes on students. To accomplish these four functions, group members can’t get sidetracked by administrative issues or issues that have a low instructional impact.

Professional study groups take the following as their content:

- Academic knowledge and understanding;
- Curriculum materials;
- Instructional strategies;
- Curriculum designs;
- Use of technologies;
- Managing students and learning environments through effective instruction;
- Assessment practices.

The intended results may be accomplished through training, reading books and articles, viewing video tapes, demonstrating strategies to each other, visiting classrooms and schools, designing materials, working with computer software, and developing lessons that will be taught in classrooms. The one question that will keep the study group instructionally focused is: Does ‘the content’ require the study group to examine student work?

#### **7. List all learning resources, both material and human.**

A study group designs its curriculum of study to include a comprehensive list of resources. Initially, groups should spend some time brainstorming learning resources that are easily accessible and those that are harder to obtain. Such lists might include:

- Textbooks and materials students use;
- Student work;
- Teachers’ manuals;
- Trainers;
- Resource people;
- Workshops;
- District/university courses;
- Books;
- Professional journals;
- Video and audio tapes;
- Computers and software; and
- Professional conferences.

Collection boxes for each study group are put in a central location and teachers deposit whatever they have or find to support other groups. This encourages teachers to share resources they have in their classrooms.

#### **8. Complete a log after each study group meeting.**

A log is a brief, written summary of what happened at a study group meeting and gives the study group a history. The group can go back and confirm why it decided on a particular action. The members can see their progress in how they relate to one another in their thinking and in their actions.

Members take turns completing the log. After a study group meeting, all members get copies. So does the principal. The log is also posted in a central location, along with logs from all the other study groups.

The study group log includes:

- Date, time, location, and leader of the meeting;
- Group members present and absent;
- Classroom applications (the teachers share what they are doing in their classrooms as a result of what they are doing in the study group);
- Brief summary of today's discussions and activities;
- At the next meeting, "we need to bring/prepare . . ."; and
- Concerns/recommendations.

#### 9. Encourage members to keep a Personal Reflection Log.

Personal reflection is important and private. How often and when individuals choose to chart their personal reactions is up to them. Such a log might include:

- Date
- "Today, we accomplished . . .";
- "We didn't get to . . .";
- "For the next meeting, I need to . . .";
- "I am learning . . .";
- "I am disappointed that . . ."; and
- "My students are benefiting from . . ."

#### 10. Establish a pattern of rotating leadership.

Each member serves as the study group leader on a rotating basis. The leadership rotation may occur weekly, biweekly, or monthly. Once a group forms around a student need, group members decide what the rotation will be. The rotation schedule is noted in the log from the first study group meeting.

The leader for a given meeting is

#### STUDY GROUPS IN ACTION: ROUND ROCK HIGH SCHOOL ROUND ROCK, TEXAS

Located in an Austin suburb, Round Rock High School has about 4,000 students and more than 250 teachers. The school's 1998-1999 campus improvement plan identified nine student needs that could be addressed through professional development, such as "Students need to use correct grammar and punctuation in all curriculum areas." Of the 42 study groups, more than half have a heterogeneous composition. This means that there may be an English teacher, a math teacher, a foreign language teacher, a physical education teacher, and an assistant principal in one study group.

All of the study groups – each with no more than six members – meet at least once every two weeks for about an hour. Some study groups meet

before school, some after school, and some during school hours. The hours that teachers work together in the study groups accumulate, and equal one or more staff development days. This means that on staff development days designated on the school calendar, many of the teachers have met that requirement through their study group time and do not report to school.

"Working together to plan activities and discuss teaching methods has been a gift, the best use of my inservice time, absolutely beneficial," one teacher at Round Rock said. "It relates directly to what we are doing on a day-to-day basis." Another commented: "As a first year teacher, I am learning bunches from the experienced teachers."

**For more information,** contact principal Sherry Blackett, Round Rock High School, 300 Lake Creek Drive, Round Rock, TX 78681, (512) 464-6000.

responsible for:

- Confirming logistics, such as time and location, with all members;
- Completing the study group log after each meeting; and
- Communicating, as appropriate, with persons who aren't study group members.

Leadership is shared to avoid having one member become more responsible than other members for the group's success. All members are equally responsible for obtaining resources and keeping the study group moving toward its intended results and desired ends.

Individual group members look to themselves and each other, not to a single person, for direction. This sense of joint responsibility for the group's work builds interdependence and synergy within the group. When every group member feels equally responsible for the group's success, there is a higher level of commitment. There is no one leader to blame for

the group's failure to accomplish its goals; all must share the burden of any failure and the joy of accomplishment.

The most positive feature of rotation is the assumption that anyone from the study group can represent the group at any point in time, expanding the effective capacity for leadership at the school.

#### 11. Give all study group members equal status.

Groups are more productive if individuals don't feel intimidated, hesitant, or anxious about differences in job titles or certifications, experience, and degree levels among group members. No one is deferred to because of rank or other factors. Contributions from each member are encouraged and respected. The study group functions under the belief that all members have something valuable to contribute to the study group, and provides an opportunity for all to share fully their ideas and experiences.

### **STUDY GROUPS IN ACTION: EVERETT HIGH SCHOOL EVERETT, WASHINGTON**

**A**t this school just north of Seattle, classes begin at 8:30 a.m. on Wednesdays instead of the usual 7:25 a.m. From 7:10 to 8:10 a.m., 20 study groups meet throughout the building. Groups are heterogeneous: One includes an English teacher, a social studies teacher, a science teacher, a business education teacher, and the media specialist. This group is focusing on research skills, looking towards the scholarly paper students must complete as part of their "Exit Exhibitions." These teachers receive training on how to teach for understanding, share strategies and materials they use to teach research skills, and conduct an inven-

tory to see what materials are available for teaching research skills. They are also designing a format they hope all teachers in the school will use to teach students to be more competent researchers.

Teachers at the middle school that feeds Everett High, and at one elementary school, also meet in study groups. An alternative high school in the district also uses the Whole-Faculty Study Group process as its primary professional development delivery system. These schools are part of ATLAS Communities, one of the seven school reform designs funded by the New American Schools Corporation.

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### **12. Plan for transitions.**

A transition is when there is a break in the flow of the group's work. This may be when a study reaches closure on what the group intended to do, when a school-wide need has to be addressed by all groups, or at the end of a school year.

At the end of a school year, the study groups have several options. If a study group has long-term work planned, it assesses its progress at the end of each semester, revisits its action plan, makes appropriate adjustments, and continues. If a study group completes its action plan and wants to stay together, a transition would be the time to celebrate its success, return to the list of student needs and agree on the student need that will be the group's new focus. When study groups reach closure on their planned work and group members want to reconfigure, new groups are formed around specifically identified student needs.

In any process, transitions can be difficult. These times especially require the support and strong sponsorship from school and district administrators. The

question at transition times is not: "Do we continue having study groups?" Instead the question is: "What changes should be made in what the groups do and how they're organized?"

### **13. Include training and other forms of staff development in the study group's agenda.**

Study groups don't eliminate the need for teachers to participate in other training and development opportunities. The groups are the centerpiece, much like the hub of a wheel. Individuals in study groups often need the expertise of trainers in areas where specific skill development is needed (Joyce & Showers, 1995). One or more individuals in a study group may attend workshops, take courses, and go to conferences. Many study groups invite trainers to study group meetings. The study group provides a safe environment for teachers to practice skills, design lessons together using those skills, observe each other, and feel support in figuring out why some lessons go well while others do not. The value of ongoing technical training and support of effective

classroom practices can't be overemphasized.

### **14. Evaluate the effectiveness of the study group.**

When considering how to evaluate the efforts of study groups, attention is given to the impact the study group's work is having on students. Secondary to student impact is the impact of the study group process on the school's culture, including the school's underlying assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors. How, for example, have study groups affected the school's norms of collegiality? Murphy and Lick (1998) give examples of several formats for assessing the progress of study groups.

### **15. Establish a variety of communication networks and systems.**

For study groups to have an effect, over time, on the whole school and all students, information must be shared among the study groups at a school. Parents, district office administrators, board of education members, and the community at large also should be kept informed of the work of the study groups.

Structures for keeping communication open are part of the design. Study group action plans and logs are posted in a public place. Short reviews are given at faculty meetings. Newsletters that give brief descriptions of the work in progress are circulated. "Swap shops" and "showcases" are organized so teachers can compare their work. Groups share speakers and materials. Bulletin boards are dedicated to sharing and videos of specific accomplishments are made. Portfolios of the work of groups are put on public display.

Most importantly, parents and students are kept informed about what study groups are learning and doing. A common practice is for teachers to tell their students what they did in the study groups immediately after the study groups meet. For school communities to support the late arrival of students, the early release of students, and professional

development days, everyone affected should understand what the teachers are doing and how students will benefit.

### CONCLUSION

Teachers have more to do than they can do. The number of initiatives that constantly bombard schools overwhelm teachers. Teachers do not need another thing to do. What teachers do seem to need is a vehicle to do what they must in an atmosphere of understanding and helpfulness.

Study groups, as described here, are not another instructional initiative. They help teachers accomplish what they're already expected to do, what they've been doing alone. With this structure, teachers share the work. Study groups are the teachers' foxholes, where diverse members are willing to set and accept

common goals and to work in a genuinely cooperative and mutually dependent manner with each other. When this happens, students are the benefactors.

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