



Leading a School Office Team



A module in the Women Leading School Office Teams program



Organizing School Office Staff into a Collaborative Team

It takes a lot of people to effectively operate a school, and developing a school culture reflective of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) requires that everyone examine their role and how they do things day in and day out.

In many ways, a school's main office staff members are the face and voice of the school. They are the first point of contact for parents and some of the most knowledgeable about all the various school activities. When a parent needs advice, they usually call the main office.

Ironically, even though the main office staff is perhaps the most visible adults within the school, they are often overlooked when it comes to organizing the school into collaborative teams.

While there is little disagreement that the support staff—especially those who work in the main office of each school—should work as a team, we are often asked, “What would such a team look like? What would they do? How do they become a functional team?”

Case in Point

While there is no right way to organize such a team, perhaps a look at the office team at Hillside High School, can serve as a frame of reference. Each team at Hillside High School — whether composed of teachers, administrators, or support staff—is expected to view themselves as a practicing PLC. That is, first they must do their work as professionals, collaboratively seeking best practices in order to continually improve their effectiveness.

Second, they must not only play a role in supporting the core purpose of the school—ensuring high levels of learning for all students—but also focus on enhancing their own learning by collaboratively analyzing the effectiveness of their work on a frequent and timely basis and utilizing the results of these discussions to seek ways to continually improve their performance. And last, they must realize that, ultimately, the quality of their work is enhanced when they work in a community—a collaborative team—with their colleagues.

Built Around Core Purpose

The Hillside High staff work to keep the learning of each student front and centre. After all, that is the primary reason parents entrust their children to a school. Every staff member plays a role to ensure student learning; it takes layers of leadership. Since being a principal is such a complex and difficult job that requires paying attention to any number of disparate tasks, the Hillside High office team work side by side to create the conditions that allow the principal to spend the bulk of his time working with teacher teams, helping them improve their effectiveness.

A Cultural Shift

Prior to organizing the office staff into a collaborative team, main office staff worked in isolation, dealing with individual tasks such as answering telephones, making copies, maintaining generic office documents, dealing with basic parent/staff concerns, etc. The office staff didn't view themselves as part of the learning environment for students, and even distanced themselves from the teaching staff, not feeling comfortable joining in the banter of the staff room, which was viewed as only for teachers.

Once the collaborative team was formed, the work changed dramatically. The team focuses on issues such as maintaining the norms they have developed and collaboratively planning and following through on their weekly agenda. There is now a sense of camaraderie—working on a common goal to meet the needs of each student. This collaboration has produced a more functional team that works closely together.

All office team members find themselves in updated roles in the PLC environment. However, the role of the office manager, working in close collaboration with the principal, has transformed the most. The office manager has adopted new routines and responsibilities in dealing with students, parents, and staff and is also an important liaison between the school and regional office.

The official job description of the office manager includes the important phrase “and other duties as assigned.” In a functioning PLC, the office manager can take over many of the traditional tasks a principal performs in order to give the principal more time to focus on issues related to student learning.

For example, among other things, the office manager at Hillside High School creates, reconciles, and maintains the school budget; coordinates daily staff absences by monitoring the placement of substitutes into suitable classrooms; and handles many parent concerns. The office manager helps set the tone of the office, creating an environment where each visitor/volunteer is welcome and each child feels safe and knows that they are cared for and supported by all staff.

Additionally, as a team leader, the office manager attends monthly meetings, collaborating with grade-level team leaders. The office manager also participates in staff meetings and attends regional team-leader trainings, and professional training sessions. The PLC training was important in order for the office manager to develop an understanding of the vocabulary, common learning practices, and tools that are used by faculty and staff within the school—terms such as common core, pacing guides, norms, power standards, differentiated instruction, pyramid of intervention, etc.

Modeling Core Values

Organizing the office staff into a collaborative team serves another important purpose. To effectively communicate those things that are truly valued, leaders must model the behaviour that is expected of others. It is important, then, for principals to organize their own office into a team, modelling the best collaborative processes and practices and continually focusing on the question, “How can we impact student learning, even if it is indirectly?”

Unfortunately, in many schools, the most visible personnel in the building—those who work in the school office—are overlooked when it comes to working as a high-performing collaborative

team. The office team at Hillside High School has realized that everyone contributes to student learning, that a job title has little to do with having a positive impact on kids. Again, there is no right way to organize school office staff into a collaborative team, but it should be done.

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