High-Impact Meetings

The foundation of effective school-based, teacher-driven professional development is the collaborative team meeting. Whether they are called critical friends groups, professional learning communities, or some other term, the fundamental strategies for effective collaboration and group facilitation remain the same. In this document, we offer several tips for success—and practices to avoid—when designing and implementing collaborative meetings. In addition, the three annotated agendas on the following pages will help show what effective meetings look like in practice. We hope that these examples will help your school accelerate professional growth and increase student performance.

Tips for Success

- Develop a common vision, clearly articulated goals, and a selection of non-negotiable focus areas that will keep meetings intensively focused on the improvement of instructional quality and student achievement.
- Create group norms during the first meeting of a professional learning group. Review the norms at the beginning of every subsequent meeting and periodically revise the list as the group evolves or new needs emerge.
- Determine roles for each meeting—select a facilitator, timekeeper, process observer, presenters, and recorder. Alternate roles for each meeting.
- Establish the meeting dates, times, and locations early on. The most effective time for collaboration is during the school day.
- Establish agreed-upon expectations and determine products: teachers will create new or improved lessons, develop common assessments, calibrate rubrics, refine and implement interventions, etc.
- Practice, practice, practice. Begin by learning and perfecting one or two protocols at a time. If more than one group member is trained in facilitation, share the responsibility for leading protocol-based discussions.
- Co-develop a standard meeting agenda during an early planning session. Use a similar framework for each meeting, but switch out protocols and topics.
- Invite specialists to participate in meetings when relevant student interventions are being addressed or when outside expertise is needed.
- Keep meetings balanced by allowing time for sharing both successes and failures, or effective and ineffective practices.
- Ensure coherence: align professional learning group activities with the school's mission statement, district goals, grant objectives, and action-plan strategies.

Practices to Avoid

- Don't force the entire faculty to be trained at once. Training should be ongoing, begin with motivated early adopters, and be scaled to match existing resources.
- Avoid organizing professional collaboration only in accordance with department structures or assigning department heads to facilitate all meetings.
- Try not to establish a precedent of compensation. Paying stipends for meeting after school hours can be a great strategy when getting a professional learning and planning program off the ground, but the practice is less financially sustainable and it tends to embed the expectation of payment in the faculty culture—thereby inadvertently signaling that professional development is an "add on," not a job-embedded school priority and professional expectation.

- Never take over professional planning meetings—they need to be owned by teachers. When observing or participating, administrators should contribute but not control.
- Avoid assigning all topics for collaborative work in advance. Establish common meeting expectations, but allow teachers to collaboratively determine discussion topics and develop agendas. Meetings need to be responsive to emerging needs and driven by teacher work.
- Don't require everyone to facilitate or lead professional learning groups. Require participation, but encourage leadership and allow people to grow into new roles.
- Prohibit digressions from the agenda or grousing about colleagues, student behavior, parents, and other issues since these behaviors squander precious time and quickly degenerate into the kinds of excuses that lead directly to inaction.

Structuring Professional Learning and Planning Teams

Effective, high-impact professional learning and planning teams are based on shared characteristics and pursuits. In other words, groups are formed around common students, content areas, professional development, or responsibilities. When developing a job-embedded professional learning and planning program, schools should create teams that mirror the structure of the academic program and that are organized to address the specific learning needs of teachers and students. The chart below describes a few common professional planning time structures.

<table>
<tr><th>GROUPING STRUCTURE</th><th>SHARED ATTRIBUTE</th><th>FOCUS AREA EXAMPLES</th><th>COMMON STRATEGIES</th></tr>
<tr><td>Team or career academy</td><td>Students</td><td>Identifying individual student learning needs and interventions</td><td rowspan="4">■ Establish common goals
■ Train facilitators
■ Develop norms
■ Create meaningful agendas
■ Use a variety of protocols
■ Look at student and teacher work
■ Provide constructive feedback
■ Focus on practice development
■ Listen attentively and respectfully
■ Keep the conversation objective and goal-oriented
■ Work with specialists or support personnel as needed
■ Use data and artifacts to inform the process</td></tr>
<tr><td>Content area</td><td>Academic discipline</td><td>Strengthening content knowledge and expertise</td></tr>
<tr><td>Interdisciplinary, grade-level, or cross-school team or program</td><td>Professional development</td><td>Integrating and improving literacy or technology strategies across the curriculum</td></tr>
<tr><td>Administrative or leadership team</td><td>Common roles or responsibilities</td><td>Refining and monitoring the school action over time and in response to emerging needs</td></tr>
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Looking at Student Work

Carve out a specific amount of time for this discussion and stick to it. Discussions about students often stray into behavioral issues, which can derail the conversation and eat up a lot of meeting time.

It is a good idea to establish a ritual to begin each meeting. The CRAN approach works: sharing personal or professional connections, reflecting on the last meeting, walking through the meeting agenda, and reviewing the established norms.

AGENDA

Consultancy Protocol

Blue Team Planning Meeting

1:00–2:20 p.m. | Room 222

1:00–1:10 **CRAN: Connections, Reflections, Agenda, Norms**

1:10–1:30 **Student Issues and Update**

1:30–2:00 **Abbreviated Consultancy**

11th-grade student project
Presenter: Jose
Facilitator: Susan

2:00–2:20 **Debrief and Next Steps**

Review the feedback and suggested ideas; identify any new strategies the teacher or group will try out in advance of the next meeting.

Review the learning needs of five students and their "interventions list." Be succinct but detailed, and provide any data-based evidence of impact.

During this part of the agenda, Jose provides copies of an assignment and student products for the team to review. The team uses the Consultancy protocol to look at the work and address the presenter's questions about instructional and invention strategies.

The process observer reviews how the meeting unfolded by making objective observations, whether positive or negative, including any deviations from the meeting's agenda or norms.

The purpose of the Consultancy protocol is to provide teachers with an opportunity to present a dilemma they are facing. Jose is concerned about the poor quality of student work he received on a particular unit. The group will help him think more deeply about the issue and come up with possible solutions: modified teaching strategies or a new project design, for example.

The recorder takes notes on the conversation and its outcomes, making sure the team has a written record of the most important conclusions, realizations, or next steps.

Looking at Teacher Work

AGENDA

Tuning Protocol

Grade 9 Humanities Meeting

2:30–4:00 p.m. | Room 101

2:30–2:40 **CRAN: Connections, Reflections, Agenda, Norms**

2:40–3:40 **Using the Tuning Protocol**

Teacher work—a newly developed interdisciplinary humanities unit—is presented for team feedback on design and assessment strategies.

Presenters: Leanne and Sam

Facilitator: Rashid

3:40–3:55 **Debrief**

The team reviews the session and co-develops a plan for the next meeting.

3:55–4:00 **Next Steps**

Assignments and agenda

Connections is typically 3–5 minutes set aside for participants to briefly share a personal or professional anecdote. Connections reminds everyone that each team member brings unique experiences, feelings, perspectives, and value to the meeting. Similarly, the group norms establish a mutually agreed-upon baseline for collegial, respectful behavior.

Leanne and Sam provide draft handouts, such as the unit's learning objectives, examples of classroom activities, or assessments. The purpose of a "tuning" process is to receive specific, in-depth feedback from colleagues that will help teachers improve or refine their work. After the feedback session, the presenters reflect on the discussion, making note of any particularly helpful comments.

Reflect on the process and outcomes, and provide any constructive feedback to the presenter. It is critically important that any obligations made to the group are fulfilled—if even one person fails to follow through, and the group does not hold the person accountable, group cohesion and trust can erode over time.

Before adjourning, make sure the group has reached agreement on the focus of the next agenda—for example, using common literacy strategies across the team. The group should also reach agreement on the presenter, facilitator, agenda, protocol, and any required materials.

It's important to leave the session with a clear plan for the next meeting, particularly if it entails an interim assignment or requires prep work for a presentation.

Looking at Student Data

The facilitator begins by describing the purpose of the data-mining protocol and walking participants through the steps. This is an important first step, particularly when groups are just beginning with protocols.

AGENDA

Data Mining Protocol

Make sure to determine roles for the meeting if the team has not already: facilitator, presenter, timekeeper, recorder, and process observer. It is also important to rotate these responsibilities from meeting to meeting—the one exception is that the facilitator should always be a trained group-discussion leader.

Sixty-Minute Data-Mining Session

8:30–9:30 a.m. | Room 62

8:30–8:40 **CRAN: Connections, Reflections, Agenda, Norms**

Roles assignment

8:40–9:20 **Learning from Data**

Key Question: Are our literacy interventions working?

9:20–9:30 **Debrief and Next Steps**

Review the feedback and suggested ideas; identify any new strategies the teacher or group will try out in advance of the next meeting.

The team is using a protocol to look at two sets of data—in this case, classroom-observation notes and disaggregated student-assessment results—to determine if their literacy strategies are making a difference. Importantly, the team has also been looking at long-term trend data to see if student performance has been improving over the past three years, which was when their literacy program was first implemented.

The team decides who will present at the next meeting, what the topic will be, and how they will continue their investigation of literacy interventions. In this case, the team decides to conduct a second series of classroom observations to see additional literacy strategies in action.