



Institute *for* Public School Initiatives
The College of EDUCATION
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

Faculty Meetings: Opportunities for Learning and Collaboration

Daryl Michel, Ph. D.

November 2014

Institute for Public School Initiatives
5316 Highway 290 West, Suite 510
Austin, Texas 78735-8931
www.ipsi.utexas.edu

The Institute for Public School Initiatives (IPSI) solves education's complex problems by building strategic partnerships with agencies, foundations, business leaders, and associations. Launched in 2004, the Institute is known for its innovative statewide solutions that increase student achievement and teacher and school effectiveness.

Faculty Meetings: Opportunities for Learning and Collaboration

Faculty meetings serve as one way to improve schools by enhancing teaching and learning, as well as building a collaborative culture. Similar to much of the literature on meetings, school improvement literature supports collegiality, emphasizes learning, and focuses on sustaining efforts and building capacity (Fullan, 2001; Harris, 2002). Improving schools includes staff members feeling valued, engaging in purposeful peer interactions, learning every day, and experiencing transparency (Fullan, 2008). For this to occur, school communities must be able to undertake and support change efforts (Harris, 2002) while maintaining a focus on curriculum, teaching, and learning.

Education and business experts who study and identify effective meeting practices emphasize the need for a purpose when bringing staff members together and planning to enhance learning. Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) suggested that “Time invested in teachers’ learning, if integrated with the development of a collaborative culture, is time that ultimately pays off for students’ learning” (p. 49). These two authors go on to say,

Teachers have little time outside ‘the courtroom’ and what they have is often not closely related to preparing their case. It is time dedicated to meetings, workshops and courses that are often disconnected from the refinements needed to improve their own teaching on an ongoing basis. (p. 49)

Faculty and staff are facing continued pressure to increase student learning in the classroom. High stakes assessments and accountability have required them to learn new strategies that might increase student achievement scores, correlate lessons with curriculum standards, understand and follow district designed scope and sequence, and implement new programs with embedded test taking strategies. Each of these actions requires preparation and learning time for effective implementation.

Given the pressure schools are under to increase student learning, faculty and staff have little time to waste. Campus principals who continue to use time in faculty meetings as platforms to disseminate

information miss opportunities to engage staff members in professional learning and increasing instructional efficacy (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Cohen & Hill, 2000). Despite the research and advice provided by scholars and experts on approaches to leading meetings, many campus principals are either unaware or do not implement these findings and ideas.

Three Texas Elementary Schools

To understand the perceptions and experiences of faculty, staff, and principals concerning faculty meetings, this study employed qualitative methods: individual and focus group interviews, along with the taping of one faculty meeting. Because I sought to understand and interpret meaning with faculty, staff, and principals about their perceptions of and experiences in faculty meetings, a dialogic hermeneutic approach guided this study. Each participant had his/her own interpretations about the purpose for faculty meetings including how they should be conducted differently and how attitudes, regulations, and other limitations, either perceived or real, may inhibit change.

This case describes findings from a study in three Texas elementary schools in the lower Rio Grande Valley. The findings represent the faculty meeting perceptions and experiences of three principals, six classroom teachers, three specialists, three paraprofessionals, and one district-level executive director.

Effective Meeting Elements

Studies in education have identified critical components and elements needed for meetings to be successful (Sexton, 1991; Klein, 2005; Arlestig, 2007; Brandenburg, 2008): preparing the meeting, opening the meeting, conducting the meeting, closing the meeting, and following up post-meeting. The tools used to support these components are: having an agenda, setting a purpose, posing questions, following a process, identifying products, honoring the time, identifying roles, establishing protocols and ground rules, and completing an evaluation (Brandenburg, 2008). Sexton (1991) found that, although these are important components and elements, principals tend to lead faculty meetings in a more authoritarian style with minimal input from the staff who participate in the meetings and devote considerable time to administrative issues.

The findings in these studies were consistent; teachers wanted to participate in discussion and decision-making (Sexton, 1991) and wanted to recommend topics for faculty meetings that focus on learning and school improvement (Brandenburg, 2008). According to existing research (Klein, 2005; Arlestig, 2007), however, many faculty meetings devoted minimal time for teacher development and student learning, little time to problem solve and interact with one another, and little time for reflection.

Effective Meetings

Meetings occur for a variety of reasons and are necessary for the success of any organization. Numerous education and business scholars have identified the necessary characteristics for effective meetings (Sexton, 1991; Luong, 2001; Klein, 2005; Arlestig, 2007; Brandenburg, 2008) including:

1. Adequate preplanning
2. Effective and proper training of facilitators
3. Encouragement of teacher expression
4. Communication that encourages different perspectives and interpretations
5. Participant engagement
6. Shared decision-making
7. Establishment of safe and nurturing environment
8. Collectively-designed ground rules
9. Agenda with relevant topics for participants
10. Effective use of time and punctuality
11. Appropriate meeting facilities
12. Selective invitation, i.e., inviting those most impacted by agenda topics

According to researchers, commitment to several of these components could aide in creating meetings that promote change or growth, reach clear outcomes, or assist in establishing collaborative relationships.

Complexity

A dichotomy exists between what research tells us about effective meetings and what faculty, staff, principals, and district representative say happens in faculty meetings. In this study, two main themes emerged (1) Unraveling Experiences: Accountability over Learning and (2) Hindering the Ideal. “Unraveling Experiences: Accountability over Learning” consists of the diverse, yet sometimes shared perspectives about faculty meetings and the emphasis placed on mandates rather than learning in these meetings. This theme signifies a lack of faculty and staff input into faculty meeting processes, an issue mostly due to pressures from the district and the larger bureaucratic mandates.

Within the “Unraveling Experiences: Accountability over Learning”, it appears that hierarchical decision-making creates an environment where mandates and expectations assume a sense of urgency in faculty meetings, while improving teaching and learning seem less important. As principals, for example, receive additional mandates and updates from district leaders, they pass these along to faculty and staff. Because of the pressures placed on principals, they tend to take minimal time to think about or ask faculty and staff to participate in setting the agenda and outcomes for faculty meetings. Time becomes a challenge: instead of allowing faculty and staff to recommend changes to faculty meeting structures, principals continue to use faculty meeting time to meet district requirements.

“Hindering the Ideal” signifies how faculty, staff, and principals would like to see faculty meetings utilized. This theme signifies how internal school pressures, external pressures from the district office or state, and federal mandates create obstacles that hinder the ideal faculty meeting from becoming a reality. Both themes are represented in the model, The Pressure Box, in Figure 1.

The Pressure Box

The Pressure Box (Michel, 2011) conceptualizes the increased expectations to bolster student achievement, while at the same time expectations and mandates outweigh the time used for teacher development and student learning.

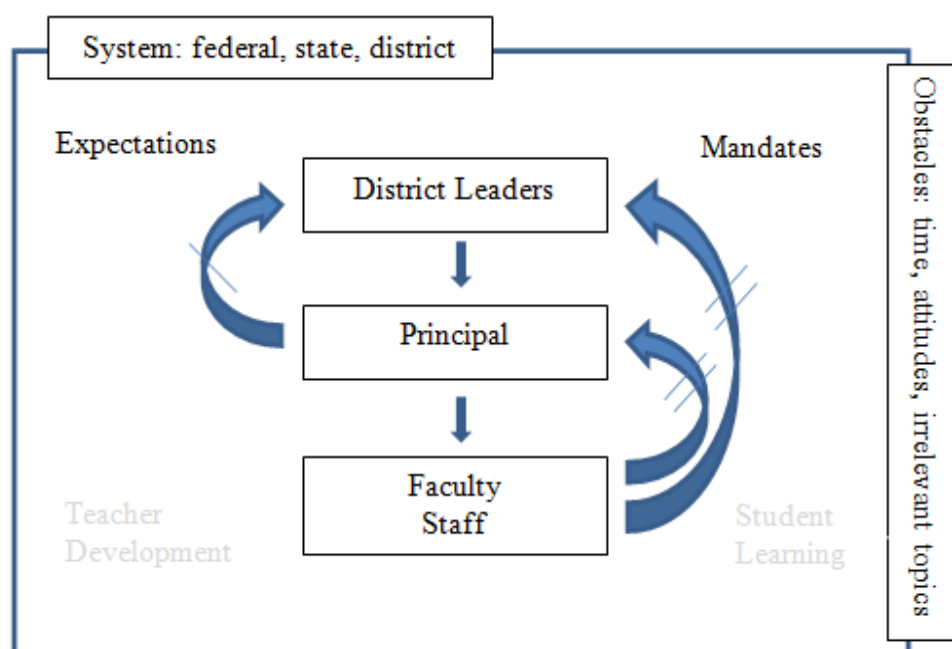


Figure 1. The Pressure Box

Amidst a time when scholars (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Fullan, 2001; Harris, 2002) have suggested that leaders empower, trust, and build capacity, increased accountability and higher expectations challenge these ideals. The pressures placed on schools result in less time spent on learning and development and more time on communicating expectations. This situation delineates a system that places more and more pressure on higher performance, but does not communicate how to achieve these higher performance levels; instead most communication is about ‘do this’ versus let’s determine and demonstrate ‘how to’.

The light shading in The Pressure Box represents what study participants believed were the purposes for schools and includes teacher development and student learning. Although these were the ideals, they were nearly non-existent in faculty meetings because expectations and mandates from the district overshadowed them. The information shared at faculty meetings tended to come from a hierarchical structure, federal, state, and local district policies disseminated via district leader interpretation to principals and then to faculty and staff with paraprofessionals often the last to receive information because they were excluded from the faculty meeting. With the increased pressures and lack of engagement or input from

faculty and staff, faculty meetings created numerous obstacles. Mandates presented resulted in participants feeling time was wasted and irrelevant information resulted in negative attitudes and actions such as faculty and staff not wanting to be present, talking to other people, discouraging others from asking questions, or focusing on going home.

The Pressure Box illustrates an environment, dominated by the hierarchical chain of commands and emphasizes mandates and expectations rather than what participants say matters most: student learning and teacher development. The Pressure Box illustrates the pressures on accountability and processes, which result in faculty and staff being talked at, tuned out, and losing interest. The center section delineates the communication structure and lack of feedback between the district leaders, principals, and faculty and staff. District leaders pass on mandates and expectations, yet often fail to gather feedback. The Pressure Box shows this incomplete or partial feedback as one line through the left-side arrow. The two lines through the right-side arrows illustrate the findings from this study that suggest faculty and staff feedback is rarely gathered from principals or the district, especially when it pertains to faculty meeting content.

Participant-Centered Learning Environment

This is a similar depiction to The Pressure Box in Figure 1; however, Figure 2 focuses less on expectations and mandates and more on teacher development and student learning. The open lines of communication allow for ongoing feedback. Many faculty and staff members in this study mentioned that if they were the ones leading, sharing, and being actively engaged that many of the obstacles to better faculty meetings would diminish significantly. They realized there would always be mandates and expectations, but they also believed there were alternative methods for presenting them.

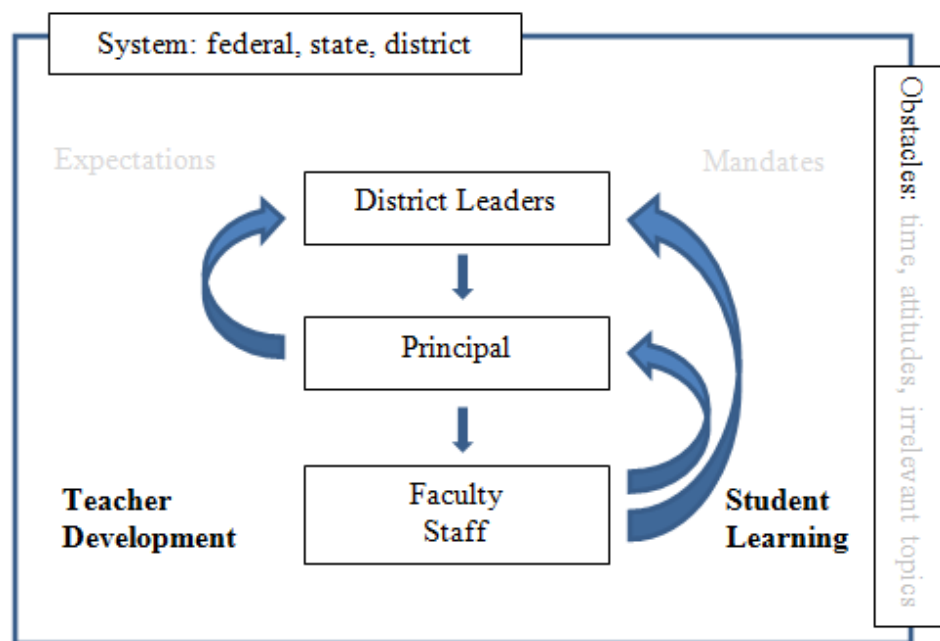


Figure 2. Participant-Centered Learning Environment

Most faculty and staff suggested that faculty meetings be participatory and inclusive of everyone. They indicated that they wanted to have the opportunity to act as leaders, feeling empowered to present to colleagues yet held accountable. They wanted time for vertical conversations to ensure the alignment of instructional strategies and to gain a deeper understanding of what students needed.

The Participant-Centered Learning Environment connects the entire system. Sergiovanni (1995) has described the systems view as “not limited to the individual teacher, the school, the workflow of teaching and schooling, or the broader political and administrative context. Instead, the four are viewed as interacting units of change, all requiring attention” (p. 280). The current faculty meeting scenarios seemed limited to one aspect of Sergiovanni’s systems view, the broader political and administrative context. Throughout principal, faculty, specialist, and paraprofessional conversation, it appeared that faculty meetings did not devote specific time to individual teachers, nor time for improving teaching. Rather, the political mandates and expectations took precedence.

Conclusion

Moving from The Pressure Box to a Participant-Centered Learning Environment will require a shift in

current thinking at multiple levels. Faculty and staff alone cannot change faculty meetings. Principals may have difficulty moving out of The Pressure Box because of the pressures they face. Nonetheless it does not appear impossible.

This study confirmed the immense pressures on schools, specifically, the mandates and expectations principals must convey to faculty staff, as well as the limited time to disseminate the information. What appears to be missing is taking the time to reflect on current meeting practices. Are we willing to engage others in critical conversations to learn about their perspectives or ideas for future meetings? Are we willing to step back and realize that someone else might have an easier or more effective way to lead a meeting? Are we willing to take the time to listen?

Despite the research and expert advice provided in studies and articles, faculty meetings, it appears, have not changed. They continue to be led in an authoritarian format, lack participation, and are most often used to disseminate information.

To learn more about this study or to request support for leading effective meetings, please contact Dr. Daryl Michel at dmichel@ipsi.utexas.edu.

References

- Arlestig, H. (2007). Principals' communication inside schools: A contribution to school improvement? *The Educational Form*, 71, 262-273.
- Brandenburg, S. (2008). *Conducting effective faculty meetings* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Dissertations & Theses. (Publication No. AAT 3316300)
- Cohen, D. & Hill, H. (2000). Instructional policy and classroom performance: The mathematics reform in California. *Teachers College Record*, 102(2), 294-343.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (1999). Target time toward teachers. *Journal of Staff Development*, 20(2), 31-36.
- Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Fullan, M. (2008). *The six secrets of change: What the best leader to do help their organizations survive and thrive*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Hargreaves, A. & Fullan, M. (1998). *What's worth fighting for out there*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Harris, A. (2002). *School improvement: What's in it for schools?* London, UK: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Klein, J. (2005). Effectiveness of school staff meetings: Implications for teacher-training and conduct of meetings. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 28(1), 67-81.
- Luong, A. (2001). *Meetings and the daily well-being of employees* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Dissertations & Theses. (Publication No. AAT 3038437)
- Michel, D. (2011). *An analysis of faculty meeting content and processes: A multi-case study of three south Texas schools* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Dissertations & Theses (Publication No. AAT 3501081)
- Sergiovanni, T. (1995). *The principalship: A reflective practice perspective* (3rd ed.).

Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Sexton, D. (1991). *Conducting faculty meetings: A new direction for principals*

(Unpublished master's thesis). University of St. Cloud State, St. Cloud, Minnesota.

About the Author

Dr. Daryl Michel is an Assistant Director at The University of Texas at Austin's Institute for Public Initiatives (IPSI). Daryl came to IPSI in 2005 and served as a Project Manager for the Texas Reading First Initiative. He has national experience in providing support to educators and school and district leaders in areas such as instructional leadership and effective teaching practices. Currently, he co-leads the Texas Literacy Initiative, leading multiple teams in developing facilitated course modules, providing face-to-face and online professional development and technical assistance, and supporting Texas schools and districts in literacy education and using data to guide instruction. Dr. Michel received his Ph.D. from Texas State University with an emphasis in Education: School Improvement. His research interests include learning communities, leading effective meetings, and teacher and administrator development.



Institute for Public School Initiatives

The University of Texas at Austin
5316 Highway 290 West, Suite 510
Austin, Texas 78735-8931
512-232-6569

www.ipsi.utexas.edu