

Making Time for Teacher Collaboration Is Crucial

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In his frequent speeches and interviews about 21st-century learning, Steven Paine often mentions an idea that sounds more folksy than futuristic. In West Virginia, where he has been state superintendent of schools since 2005, Paine is building what he calls "a back porch for teachers."

His goal is to give educators places to come together and talk about innovative ideas that may well revolutionize public education. (To learn more about West Virginia's 21st-Century Learning Initiative, read the *Edutopia* article "Taking the Initiative: A Sweeping Agenda for Twenty-First-Century Change." (<http://www.edutopia.org/collaboration-age-technology-west-virginia>))

Recently, I had the pleasure of sitting a spell on this metaphorical back porch when I caught up with a cadre of West Virginia teacher leaders during a summer institute. For the past three years, educators here have been immersed in an ambitious professional-development campaign.

The leadership group comes together regularly for in-depth discussions about topics such as project learning, technology integration, and authentic-assessment strategies. Then they take ideas back home to share with their colleagues. That way, back-porch conversations about teaching and learning expand to reach all 20,000 teachers across the Mountain State.

Conversations continue online, too, at a site called Teach 21 (<http://wvde.state.wv.us/teach21>). Here, educators find a growing collection of resources to prompt professional discussions, including classroom video clips submitted by West Virginia teachers.

What do educators talk about? At the summer institute, I heard teachers brainstorming about how to connect upper-level, high school math instruction with real-world problems. I watched art specialists work with English teachers to find common ground where their disciplines overlap.

I listened to educators brainstorm strategies for managing project-learning instruction so that students will make the most of learning opportunities. I watched teachers explore Web 2.0 tools and evaluate the classroom potential of new technologies.

And although they took their work seriously, it was easy to see they were enjoying the extended time to talk through ideas and learn from each other. Such intensive, ongoing, and collaborative professional development is exactly what research shows to be most effective for improving both teachers' practice and student learning. Yet for most teachers, this remains a rare experience.

Earlier this year, the National Staff Development Council released a report, "Professional Learning in the Learning Profession." (<http://www.nsd.org/news/NSDCstudy2009.pdf>) As the report points out, the United States "is far behind in providing public school teachers with opportunities to participate in extended learning opportunities and productive collaborative communities."

Not enough teachers, it seems, are offered a back porch to congregate and the time to take advantage of each others' wisdom.

Does your school make space for teachers to engage in deep conversations about teaching and learning? Where and when do your best conversations with colleagues take place? Please share your thoughts.

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