INSTRUCTIONAL PLANNING TIME

A Review of Existing Research and Educator Practice During the 2012-2013 School Year ***EXECUTIVE SUMMARY***

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A study of instructional planning periods was undertaken in late 2013 pursuant to West Virginia State Code §18A-4-14 which states: *"The state board shall conduct a study on planning periods. The study shall include, but not be limited to, the appropriate length for planning periods at the various grade levels and for the different types of class schedules."* The West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) Office of Research was tasked by the West Virginia Board of Education (WVBE) to carry out this study.

METHODS

We employed two strategies to address the study. First, we reviewed the existing research literature on planning time to address the following questions:

1. What is the impact on student achievement as a result of increased planning time?
2. Is there an appropriate duration for planning periods?
3. What types of planning models are used in schools and supported by research to have an impact on outcomes?
4. What are effective leadership practices that support successful implementation of planning time?

The regional educational laboratory (REL) for the Appalachia region assisted in locating credible studies that addressed these questions and provided brief annotated bibliographies. The resulting information is summarized in this report.

Second, we conducted a survey of West Virginia educators that asked questions related to participants' current instructional planning practices and perceptions about the appropriate amount of instructional planning time. We administered both online and paper-and-pencil versions of the Legislative Planning Period Study Survey (hereafter, *educator survey*) between August 19 and September 30, 2013 to a representative sample of 2,000 West Virginia educators. This 13-item survey included three sections: (a) participant demographics, (b) school planning/scheduling practices, and (c) individual planning practices. The final survey item was open-ended and asked for educators' comments about planning time. For all quantitative survey items we used descriptive statistics to describe current and ideal planning practices for various groups of educators using demographic information collected via the survey and the West Virginia Education Information System (WVEIS). For qualitative data collected via the survey, two researchers first reviewed all comments independently, and identified emerging themes and subthemes for each. The researchers then met to discuss the identified themes and come to a consensus regarding the final set of themes for each comment.

RESULTS

Research literature review

Unfortunately, because instructional planning is a very complex issue there is no definitive recommendation from the research literature with respect to the amount of time necessary to support effective instructional planning. However, there is general agreement that more, rather than less planning time is beneficial. Some evidence exists supporting the provision of at least 3 hours per week to achieve beneficial impacts related to student achievement. This figure is, however, only supported by one rigorous research study. With respect to the effectiveness of various planning models, there is considerable research support for the benefits of using *collaborative* planning. Its use has been associated with increased academic achievement and educators report such opportunities improve their classroom instruction. Furthermore, in at least one state, it has been found that lower-performing schools tend to provide less time for collaborative planning than higher-performing schools. Yet, simply providing time for collaboration in the school schedule is not enough. There must be adequate training/support regarding how to most effectively implement collaborative planning. Several high-quality practice guides cited in this report could be used to help inform districts and schools in this area.

Research on the impact of individual planning is limited; however the use of collaborative planning has been associated with improved student achievement, especially at the secondary level. Currently, there is no definitive research-based recommendation regarding the amount of instructional planning time needed to realize benefits to students.

Regarding the role of leadership in encouraging successful collaborative planning, we found there are a variety of practices that should be considered. These include, but are not limited to: (a) providing time and resources to support professional development and capacity building so that staff have the skills necessary to fully take advantage of collaborative time, (b) prioritizing and protecting collaborative time within the school schedule, (c) ensuring collaborative teams are appropriately organized and include the right members,

(d) ensuring teams are coherently focused and working in alignment with other school and district goals, and (e) establishing a clear rationale and communication plan that describes the purpose and expectations for collaborative planning.

Educator survey

Factors such as programmatic level, school schedule type, teacher role, content area, and specialization all have impacts on how much and what kind of instructional planning educators need.

Our educator survey revealed many important findings related to West Virginia educators' current and ideal planning practices. First, it is abundantly clear that educators at all levels spend considerable time planning outside of regular school hours, on average between approximately 60 and 75 additional minutes per day. A general estimate of the total average time spent planning both during and after school hours across programmatic levels is approximately 2 hours. This estimate is an average, and there are individual cases where educators spend considerably less or more time planning each day. Likewise, the overwhelming sentiment from educators was that planning time is rarely used solely for instructional planning. Other duties can and often do tend to usurp planning time. Second, educators in all programmatic levels believe, on average, more than one hour per day is the ideal amount of individual planning time to support effective instruction. The amount of time considered ideal is considerably higher among middle and high school educators than among elementary educators. Also, for the average K-12 educator, comparing their currently allotted planning time to the amount they believe is ideal to support effective instruction reveals a deficit of between 21 and 24 minutes depending upon programmatic level. Addressing this daily deficit may seem like a large increase when considering overall planning time, yet granting educators this much additional time would only modestly increase the amount of planning time available per prep, especially in the case of elementary educators.

We found several key differences among planning practices at different programmatic levels. First, elementary educators reported the lowest average daily planning time of all programmatic levels (40.25 minutes) followed by middle and high school educators who reported 51.10 minutes and 60.14 minutes, respectively. Elementary educators also have a considerably higher number of daily preps (5.87) when compared with middle and high school educators (3.24 and 3.04, respectively). Thus, elementary educators report having considerably less time to plan per daily prep—approximately nine minutes per prep compared to more than 20 for middle and high school educators. Second, an extraordinary percentage of middle school educators reported their schools use both independent and team planning (approximately 71%). This percentage was considerably lower in elementary and high schools. The use of independent and team planning in a large proportion of middle schools could be partially attributable to the fact that one third of all middle school educators surveyed reported their schools utilized a team-based schedule (middle school model). Collaborative planning is a central feature of this scheduling model and has been an integral part of the middle school organizational structure since the 1960s (Cook & Faulkner, 2010). Of note, high school was the only programmatic level where a vast majority of individuals reported only having independent planning time (approximately 74%). This finding is unanticipated given the emergence of collaborative planning as a best practice among secondary schools in the research literature. Third, when examining uninterrupted planning time as a percentage of total daily planning we found that middle school educators on average reported the least uninterrupted planning time of all programmatic levels (57.43%) followed by elementary and high school educators (65.33% and 67.49%, respectively). However, these findings should be interpreted cautiously as it is not clear how survey respondents interpreted the term "uninterrupted planning."

Other duties often usurp daily instructional planning time. Personal time spent outside of school for instructional planning varies considerably, but averages about 69 minutes daily.

Several interesting findings emerged when comparing planning practices among high school educators in traditional and block schedule schools. First, more than a third of high school educators indicated their school operates using a block schedule. Second, and not surprisingly, educators in block schedule high schools reported, on average, having approximately 40 more minutes of in school planning time available than educators in traditional schedule high schools. Third, the average number of preps does not vary significantly among traditional and block schedule high schools—both groups had approximately three per day. Therefore, the amount of time available per prep among these groups differs greatly, with educators in block schedule high schools reporting approximately 57% more planning time available per prep than their counterparts in traditional schedule high schools. This finding should be interpreted alongside the fact

that educators in block high schools prepare 90 minutes of instruction per prep. Fourth, despite large differences in the amount of time available for planning each day and per prep, there was almost no difference in the amount of additional time educators reported spending planning outside of school hours. Both groups of educators reported an average of approximately 69 additional minutes each day. Fifth, we found on average, there is a perceived deficit of almost 30 minutes to support effective planning during the school day among educators in traditional schedule high schools. This is considerably less than the deficit of only 6 minutes per day reported by educators in block high schools. Sixth, survey respondents indicated a substantially larger percentage of planning time is uninterrupted in block schedule high schools than in traditional schedule schools (i.e., 71.00% and 64.46%).

On average, West Virginia educators believe they ideally need about 22 more minutes of planning time at school daily to support effective instruction.

Our examination of grade level data did not reveal substantive differences among individual grade levels as much as it reinforced the importance of considering planning time within the conceptual framework of programmatic levels. However, one individual grade did stand out, Pre-Kindergarten (PK). Perhaps the most interesting aspect of PK planning practices is that several PK educators report receiving their individual planning periods in full day increments each week rather than dispersed into smaller amounts throughout the week. It is unclear from this study if this practice is positive or negative in their perception. Notably, despite having the least amount of daily planning time, PK educators also reported the highest percentage of uninterrupted daily planning time of any grade (approximately 82%).

Educators' comments regarding instructional planning were diverse and expansive. We received comments from approximately 60% of all survey respondents indicating that this is an important issue to them. Examining these comments at the micro level was a useful exercise because it revealed five predominant themes and four additional considerations. First, educators overwhelmingly indicated that duties beyond instructional planning often usurp their planning time. These duties include IEP and SAT meetings, student interventions, administrative tasks, providing coverage for other educators, and a variety of other tasks. Some are central to effective instruction, but many are solely preparatory in nature or administrative. There is a sentiment that these tasks greatly impact the amount of time reserved for actual lesson planning. Educators implore non-educators to understand this issue when considering making changes to their planning time. Second, educators spend a significant amount of time planning beyond the school day. The amount varies greatly among individual educators. Educators understand this is a necessity to some extent, but when excessively utilized, it is clear this practice contributes to perceptions of increased stress, occupational burnout, and job dissatisfaction. Third, educators have differential planning needs depending upon their unique roles. Particularly vocal educator groups advocating this approach include elementary and PK educators, special educators, educators of science/laboratory courses, and teachers of English/language arts courses, especially at the high school level. Fourth, planning is considered central to student achievement by West Virginia educators. They believe generally that adequate individual and collaborative instructional planning is necessary to support proper instruction. Fifth, separate from other administrative duties/tasks, interruptions often disrupt reserved planning time. These include assemblies, fire drills, student behavior issues, and a variety of other distractions.

Four additional considerations emerged from participant comments. First, the implementation of new standards and demands greatly impacts planning time. Specific demands mentioned by educators included the implementation of the West Virginia Next Generation Content Standards and Objectives, the revised educator evaluation system, and the demands associated with designing technology-rich lessons for students. Second, there is a complex relationship among planning time and school scheduling. The two are inexorably connected. Third, many schools utilize different planning procedures/policies for teachers of differing role groups. Examples include that many PK educators receive weekly planning time instead of daily planning time; some schools provide collaborative planning time only to specific groups of educators; and planning practices for certain other groups such as school counselors and librarians differ greatly from the majority of educators. Fourth, the limited amount of planning time that is available to educators contributes to a sense of job dissatisfaction, stress, and burnout among some educators. This consideration is particularly salient when considering the costs of teacher turnover.

In West Virginia, collaborative planning is employed most often at the middle school level, and to a lesser extent in elementary schools. Nearly 74% of high school educators report only independent planning is used in their schools.

As interesting as it is to consider these themes and additional considerations individually, it is also important to see the myriad complex patterns that exist among themes. For instance, the burden of other duties and frequent interruptions

during individual planning time contributes to educators having to use their own personal time beyond the school day for instructional planning. This in turn leads to higher levels of stress and fatigue, and ultimately may influence teacher retention. This example is one of many and reflects the vast complexity of these issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Maintain or increase current levels of planning time. Unfortunately, the research literature does not support a magic number for the amount of planning time necessary to produce good student outcomes. There is at best only tentative support for the provision of at least 3 hours a week. In light of this fact, and teacher input on this matter, it would not be advisable to reduce the available planning time any further. A 40-minute planning period provided five times a week provides for just 3.33 weekly hours. Given the evidence that interruptions and other duties commonly usurp planning time, an increase in the minimum amount of planning time available might even be necessary to ensure educators receive no less than 3 hours of uninterrupted planning time each week.

Advocate strongly for the integration of collaborative planning as a central feature of school practice, especially among secondary schools. Research supports this approach; when implemented well it can increase student achievement. While it is a common feature in middle schools, educators in less than 25% of all high schools in West Virginia reported collaborative planning as a feature of their schools' schedule.

Beyond advocating for more collaborative time, provide tangible support to leadership at the district and school level that focuses upon building leaders' capacity to (a) provide time and resources to support professional development and capacity building so staff have the skills necessary to fully take advantage of this time, (b) prioritize and protect collaborative time within the school schedule, (c) ensure collaborative teams are appropriately organized and include the right members (e.g., grade level, content area, programmatic level, etc.), (d) ensure teams are coherently focused and working in alignment with other school and district goals, and (e) establish a clear rationale and communication plan that describes the purpose and expectations for collaborative planning. Without this support, it is unlikely schools will realize the benefits of collaborative planning.

Consider teacher role as a factor in determining the amount of planning time necessary. In this category, we include at minimum programmatic level, the number of courses taught, the number of students served, content areas taught, and educator specializations. In other words, one size may not fit all in the case of planning time. Flexibility should be afforded to schools to allow them to account for these differential needs.

Consider seeking additional input from administrators and LEAs regarding this issue. These individuals undoubtedly have important opinions on this topic, and their input must be considered when making any changes to how planning time is implemented. As stated previously in this report, we believe some flexibility is warranted to allow districts and schools to execute a planning strategy that best meets their individual needs.

REFERENCE

Cook, C. M., & Faulkner, S. A. (2010). The use of common planning time: a case study of two Kentucky schools to watch. *Research in Middle Level Education, 34* (2), 1–12.

The full report is available on the WVDE Office of Research website: *http://wvde.state.wv.us/research/reports2013.html*