

Creativity From Necessity: A Practical Toolkit for Leaders to Address Teacher Shortages

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Identifying Workload Issues

Structured Conversation

What and Why

As leaders, we keep teacher sustainability top of mind, but perception of how much time it takes teachers to complete assigned tasks and what impact this workload will have on student achievement is not always aligned with the reality of the teacher experience.

To better understand the teacher experience, we recommend facilitating a structured conversation with groups of teachers to identify the biggest workload issues. We recommend leveraging the principles of the [Action Priority Matrix](#) and using a four-quadrant priority matrix, which would push educators to think through tasks using effort and impact as a lens. This data will help prioritize, modify, or eliminate teacher tasks and responsibilities.

Before engaging in the conversation, the facilitator should determine the outcomes.

Here are three potential outcomes:

- *Identify* key drivers of workload.
- *Collect input* from staff on which tasks to prioritize, modify, or eliminate.
- *Co-create* a plan to prioritize, modify, or eliminate tasks.

How

This should be an interactive, collaborative, and engaging meeting, with teachers doing a lot of the sharing and providing input. The conversation can be conducted as a whole-staff activity or in small teams based on adult culture and trust of the organization. Devote at least 90 minutes to this conversation to ensure it does not feel rushed.

Ensure the space is conducive to collaboration by organizing the tables or chairs in a U shape or circle. Procure a whiteboard, flip-chart, and/or stickies to help facilitate and document the conversation.

Start with an opening statement that shares the objective of the meeting, clarifies roles, and states the process for how decisions will be made.

When

We suggest facilitating this meeting anytime between January and June, after the cadence of the school year is underway.

Protocol

Adapt this protocol to fit the needs and culture of your school. The suggested time in the facilitation tips are estimates; modify as needed.

Protocol and Facilitation Guide

| Step | Description | Facilitation Tips |
|--|---|---|
| Visioning | Imagine an ideal workweek: Tell me how you would spend your time between teaching, planning, administrative tasks, coverage, and other responsibilities. | <p>5 minutes: Teachers independently free-write their vision.</p> <p>5 minutes: Teachers share out; facilitator captures on whiteboard.</p> |
| Reality Check | How does your actual workweek compare with your ideal week? | 5 minutes: Open discussion; facilitator listens. |
| Taking Stock | Brainstorm all deliverables/tasks due on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis and document time spent to complete each one. | 10 minutes: Document on whiteboard. |
| Introduce Action Matrix Concept | Introduce the four-quadrant matrix, and tasks fall into these categories: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High impact and high effort. • High impact and low effort. • Low impact and high effort. • Low impact and low effort. | 5 minutes: Facilitator shares how they are defining impact, effort, low, and high. |
| Independent Plotting | To ensure all staff members have a point of view, give everyone time to complete their own matrix. | 10 minutes: Provide a matrix template. |
| Group Plotting | Take each task brainstormed and determine where it falls on the matrix, considering effort and impact on student achievement. Guidance below: <p>Tasks to Keep:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which deliverables/tasks have the <i>highest impact</i> on teaching and learning? <p>Tasks to Reconsider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Which deliverables/tasks have <i>limited impact</i> on teaching and learning? • Which deliverables/tasks are the biggest workload issues that have <i>limited impact</i> on teaching and learning? • If you could change a system or structure that affects your workload, what would you change and how? | <p>20 minutes: For each task, facilitate an open discussion about how much time it takes to complete and the impact it has on staff workload and students — <i>is it helping me serve my students better?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross out each task from your list as you place it on the matrix. • Call on a variety of staff members to ensure many backgrounds and voices are represented. • Use habits of discussion strategies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you agree/disagree? • Add on. • Consider another point of view. |

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| <p>Narrative Findings</p> | <p>Based on your recording format, invite staff members to narrate the findings using the sentence frames: <i>I notice...</i> and <i>I wonder...</i></p> | <p>5 minutes: Call on a variety of staff members to ensure many backgrounds and voices are represented.</p> |
| <p>Decision-Making</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reiterate the objective of the meeting and move forward appropriately. • If making decisions together or you want to collect further input, share or co-create decision-making criteria anchored on impact. • Leaders and staff share their recommendations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliminate/modify high-effort, low-impact tasks. • Eliminate/modify low-effort, low-impact tasks. • Reassess high-effort, high-impact tasks (potentially hiring additional support). | <p>15 minutes: Not all decisions have to be made in this meeting; you can use a parking lot when there is uncertainty or more information is needed.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call on a variety of staff members to ensure many backgrounds and voices are represented. • Make thinking visible by representing staff input on the matrix, such as star tasks to be kept, cross out tasks to eliminate, and triangle tasks to modify. |
| <p>Check for Alignment and Collect Feedback</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To ensure all voices are heard, collect written feedback from all staff members. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will the decisions made help us achieve our “ideal week” vision? • Is there additional feedback you would like to share? | <p>10 minutes: This feedback can be collected via a survey or via a paper-based exit ticket.</p> |
| <p>Share Next Steps</p> | <p>Share precise next steps, such as when decisions will be finalized and when implementation begins.</p> | <p>5 minutes: Express gratitude and next steps.</p> |