

Tools *for* LEARNING SCHOOLS

Inside

- Tool: A dozen reasons to celebrate, pp. 4-5
- Tool: Celebration brainstorming, p. 6
- Tool: Planning celebrations, p. 7

Fall 2013

Vol. 17, No. 1

EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

CELEBRATE

professional
transitions
and successes
to drive and sustain
implementation



By Anthony Armstrong

The teachers at Hogg Middle School (Houston, Texas) are accustomed to celebrating each other's professional learning. "Celebrations are a non-negotiable collaborative compact, or norm, for us," said Mina Schnitta, the school's principal. "Adults need to support each other in their learning. We need to focus on each other's strengths and celebrate them."

A large bulletin board, their "Honk Board," sits prominently in their staff lounge. The board provides a place for teachers and staff to post compliments about each other. "The compliments are on things we see in improving instruction," explained Schnitta. "They are not the usual 'I

saw someone doing something nice' type of compliments. Instead, they have a more instructional focus."

Schnitta's teachers can also earn PRIDE tickets. "The instructional leadership team passes these out to teachers who are exhibiting politeness, intelligence, discipline, and engaged behaviors," said Schnitta. "The teachers can accrue these and trade them in for things like new supplies or 30 minutes where I teach their class."

According to Kent Peterson, celebrations are an important component for high-quality learning communities. "Celebrations are critical to effective change. Celebrations bring people together at important times during the life of a

Continued on p. 2



Your membership in Learning Forward gives you access to a wide range of publications, tools, and opportunities to advance professional learning for student success. Visit www.learningforward.org to explore more of your membership benefits.

Continued from p. 1

school and reinforce the social fabric,” said Peterson, emeritus professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis for the University of Wisconsin-Madison and co-author with Terrence Deal of *Shaping School Culture* (2009).

BUILD A SENSE OF PURPOSE

“To ensure success, short-term wins must be both visible and unambiguous Such wins provide evidence that the sacrifices that people are making are paying off. This increases the sense of urgency and the optimism of those who are making the effort to change.” (John Kotter)

Too much of a focus on following procedures, said Peterson, turns change efforts into mechanical procedures and often misses opportunities to connect the change to core values. “Some leaders focus so much on the structural aspects or technical skills within a change effort that they forget there is a human side to making it work. Celebrations bring people together with the mission and values of the institution and remind them why they became educators, effectively moving them from being ‘employed’ to being a teacher again.”

To help sustain staff commitment and motivation during change efforts, Peterson explained, school and teacher leaders can use ceremonies, informal or formal, to connect school improvement to core values. “They can tell stories of how a program has served kids or talk about the history of innovation in the school, connecting the core values to a school’s history and change efforts,” said Peterson.

Connecting professional learning to core values, hopes, and dreams, is an easy step to overlook when overwhelmed with new procedures or techniques, said Peterson. “It is easy to get caught in the mundane and administrative side of getting the work done, such as the structural part of implementation, developing skills, and finding time to work together, and to forget the broader calling of education and what you are trying to accomplish.”

PLAN AHEAD

Short-term wins rarely simply happen. They are usually the result of careful planning and effort. (Kotter)

According to Schnitta, educators are so overwhelmed with things to do, slowing down and making time to acknowledge small successes can be a significant challenge. “For me, the key is to plan it or it won’t happen. I try to be very conscious of how we are celebrating. Once our teachers

learn something new and practice it in a nonthreatening environment, they need to see the success and celebrate that success. When planning our learning community work, we make sure to include time where they can share and see others’ successes.”

Schnitta believes there is always something to celebrate. “We are always learning, studying data, and modeling. Little things like snapping fingers or high fives are quick and easy ways to celebrate the little steps we make forward. We might observe a teacher using academic vocabulary and give him or her a certificate acknowledging that change in practice.”

Learning Forward Executive Director Stephanie Hirsh shares how the organization’s staff agreements emphasize celebrating contributions. “We set aside time at each meeting to invite celebrations large and small and we build in structures to acknowledge great work,” Hirsh said. “When the rituals of an organization emphasize its values, the culture shifts in ways that support both gratitude and collaboration.”

The first step to planning celebrations, said Peterson, is to look for natural transitions within the change efforts. “It could be the beginning, middle, end, or other significant milestone, depending on what is happening.”

MARK TRANSITIONS

“(Short-term) wins also serve to reward the change agents by providing positive feedback that boosts morale and motivation. The wins also serve the practical purpose of helping to fine-tune the vision and the strategies.” (Kotter)

Any effort to bring in new skills or techniques inherently has critical transition points that should be recognized and celebrated, said Peterson. “If you don’t mark the beginning of a major change effort, such as using data for decision making, people won’t see it as important,” explained Peterson. “It doesn’t have to be a big ceremony. Even the smallest success, such as a teacher realizing how to use a technique successfully, could be cause for a small celebration, such as telling a story or sending out a tweet.”

Schnitta makes sure that even the daily, short teacher collaboration meetings contain regular celebrations. “Sometimes we just check in on how we are feeling at the beginning of meetings, and sometimes we celebrate a huge success. Everyone shares something positive about their growth. We also end our meetings on a similar positive note.”

Celebrations can also help teams transition through times of anxiety, uncertainty, or loss, such as when a member of the team leaves the group. According to Joellen Killion (2011), celebrating past contributions or successes

Continued on p. 3

Learning Forward BELIEF

Successful leaders create and sustain a culture of learning.

Continued from p. 2
shows how the past has contributed to moving forward. Finding positives to celebrate in these moments helps document transitions, encourages awareness and openness regarding the change, and acts as a catalyst for moving forward in a positive manner.

BRING EVERYONE ON BOARD

“Short-term wins also tend to undermine the credibility of cynics and self-serving resisters. Clear improvements in performance make it difficult for people to block the needed change. Likewise, these wins will garner critical support from those higher than the folks leading the change (bosses, board, and shareholders).

Finally, short-term wins have a way of building momentum that turns neutral people into supporters, and reluctant supporters into active helpers. (Kotter)

For Schnitta, making sure her teams are comfortable with celebrations starts with consciously planning time during their daily activities to take a moment and focus on their strengths. “When learning something new and changing behavior, it is important to pay attention to the needs of their emotional side just as much as their logical side.”

Change is often a large group or team effort, which can often cause hesitancy in celebrating individuals. In these situations, Peterson suggests celebrating the team instead of an individual team member, while being as specific as possible in acknowledging the actions that brought success without naming teachers or people.

“If 5th grade implemented a well-designed writing program for kids,” explained Peterson, “some staff probably researched ideas, others came in as coaches, others may have brought great food to the meetings so everyone stayed energized and weren’t distracted, etc. Teachers will know who was the cook or who was the funny person that kept the mood up, and they will feel it was a group effort.”

There will be times, though, when it is important to recognize the individuals who are exemplars of a school’s desired culture. “Sometimes, you need to identify the



“When the rituals of an organization emphasize its values, the culture shifts in ways that support both gratitude and collaboration.”

— Stephanie Hirsh
Learning Forward executive director

exemplars,” said Peterson. “By talking about the heroes and heroines of the change effort, you show people what’s possible. Often these people may not want to be recognized, but if you don’t talk about things that are truly exceptional or unique that a teacher has done, it can lower the expectations or hopes of teachers that may think they are just average.”

Celebrating individual contributions, Peterson cautions, should also include showing how those contributions couldn’t have been accomplished without the support of the team.

Peterson recommends avoiding wildly energetic or long celebrations in schools that have dysfunctional dynamics, and instead he recommends easing into celebrations by telling stories. “There will always be naysayers and saboteurs. Bring them along in small steps — tell stories in staff meetings of what people saw in classrooms, bring in alumni who are successful, and pay attention to the history of the school. The past is the prologue to present and future. Show them their goals are possible.”

REFERENCES

Deal, T. & Peterson, K. (2009). *Shaping school culture: Pitfalls, paradoxes, and promises* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Killion, J. (2011, May). 4 tips for celebration in the season of leaving. *Teachers Teaching Teachers*, 6(8), 7-8. Available at www.learningforward.org/publications/leading-teacher/leading-teacher-blog/the-leading-teacher/2011/05/01/teachers-teaching-teachers-may-2011-vol.-6-no.-8.

Kotter, J. (n.d.) Step 6: Generating short-term wins. In *The 8-Step Process*. Available at www.kotterinternational.com/our-principles/changesteps/step-6.

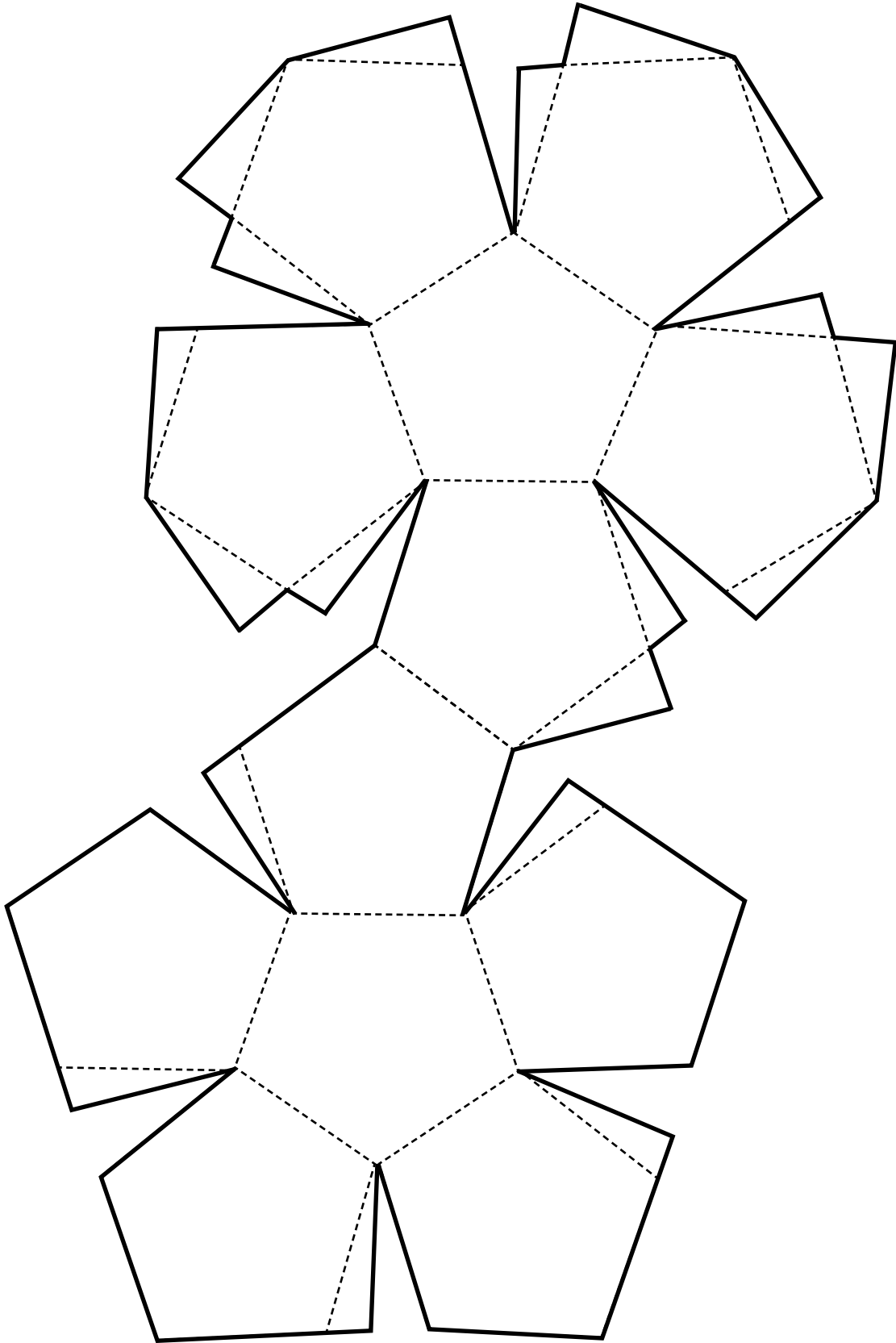
Anthony Armstrong (anthony.armstrong@learningforward.org) is Learning Forward’s associate director of publications. ●

A dozen reasons to celebrate

Use this tool to offer an opportunity for your educators to pause and reflect about their accomplishments in the first several months of school, or to create a new beginning for the remainder of the year.

The dodecahedron encourages your staff to either reflect or anticipate.

| Materials | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Scissors, colored pencils or markers, magazines, glue or glue sticks, tape. If you have additional copies of your school's yearbook, you may want to provide that so teachers can clip pictures of their students. | |
| Directions | Time |
| 1. Copy the template on p. 5 onto thick pieces of paper or cardboard. Make at least one for every teacher. Have teachers cut along the solid lines. Do not fold into shape yet. | |
| 2. Invite teachers to celebrate an accomplishment in each face of the dodecahedron, or invite teachers to consider their goals for the remaining months of the school year and include one goal on each face of the dodecahedron. | 30 minutes |
| 3. When they are finished, have teachers fold the figure along the dotted lines to create the dodecahedron. Fold each triangular tab under the adjacent pentagon and tape down. Each dodecahedron should be able to sit flat on a table when it is complete. | |
| 4. Invite teachers to share at least one accomplishment or goal with the assembled group. | 30 minutes |
| <p>Note: If you use this activity to help your staff identify goals for the spring months, consider in advance how you can revisit these goals at the end of your school year.</p> | |



Celebration brainstorming

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Comments to the facilitator | Participants will hear and discuss the rationale for celebrations and recognition. |
| Time | First of two meetings, 30 minutes each. |
| Supplies | Varies. Tables for small-group seatings. |
| Preparation | About a week before the first meeting, provide a copy of the lead article in this issue to meeting participants. Ask them to read the article. |
| <p>On the meeting day, arrange the room to invite free discussion. The atmosphere should be informal and relaxed. Arrange small groups of individuals from across grades and subject areas.</p> | |
| Directions | |
| <p>1. Tell participants they are going to discuss the importance of stopping periodically to congratulate each other for a job well done. Tell them the goal of the meeting is to structure celebrations and recognitions into the school year.</p> | |
| <p>2. Initiate discussion by saying something like this: "I'm sure all of you have memories of special times when you were recognized for your work — and because of the person who recognized you or because of the timing of the recognition, it had tremendous impact." Then, share your favorite celebration or recognition.</p> | |
| <p>3. Ask participants to take a few moments to reflect on one of those special memories. Allow one minute for this.</p> | |
| <p>4. At the end of the minute, invite participants to share their memories with others at their tables. Allow two to three minutes for this.</p> | |
| <p>5. At the end of that time, pose this question: "If you could plan a celebration or recognition for all of us this year, what would it celebrate? When would it occur? What impact would it have?" Allow a few minutes for each group to brainstorm.</p> | |
| <p>6. Directions for the second meeting are on p. 7.</p> | |

Planning celebrations

| | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Comments to the facilitator | Participants will hear and discuss the rationale for celebrations and recognition. |
| Time | 30 minutes. |
| Supplies | Varies. Tables for small-group seatings. |
| Preparation | Form groups according to the existing team structure — or grades, subjects, study focus, whatever is appropriate for this group. Seat each group together at a small table. |
| Directions | |
| 1. Ask someone besides the facilitator to lead this meeting. Ask the leader to begin with a testimonial about a special celebration or recognition they experienced. | |
| 2. Identify the student and adult learning goals your group is trying to reach and how you will know when your team/school has reached that goal. | |
| 3. Then, design a celebration that will recognize when your team/school has reached each goal. Discuss how the celebration will contribute to your learning culture or sense of progress toward your goal. | |
| 4. Coordinate the dates of the celebrations with other events in your school by marking the celebration dates on your school's master calendar. | |
| 5. Assign someone to coordinate each celebration. | |
| 6. Refer back to the celebration chart during the year to doublecheck your progress. | |