A Center for Interactive Professional Development

Through alliances, networks, and study committees, Wisconsin's Regional Staff Development Center brings together educators from all grade levels and disciplines to learn with and from one another.



Alliances in common subject areas are formed to help teachers maintain a spirit of inquiry and enthusiasm in their field. Here, a physics teacher shares a successful classroom demonstration with her colleague.

The Regional Staff Development Center serves the professional development needs of educators in 23 school districts and 3 postsecondary institutions in Kenosha and Racine Counties, Wisconsin. The center, which is a philosophy as well as a place, has grown out of this educational community's ten-year history of collaboration. In 1978 the University of Wisconsin-Parkside took the initiative to establish a relationship between the university and school districts. The eventual formation of the Educators' Consortium for Excellence—composed of administrative, board, and teacher association leaders—was a giant step in uniting educators in the region. The consortium's first major project, the creation of the Regional Staff Development Center, was a logical next step in school-college collaboration.

The center's programs and services promote the support, recognition, and training of educators, bringing together faculty, administrators, board mem-



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bers, and union officials from all educational levels. Ongoing projects include a beginning teacher induction program, 14 academic alliances, 6 mutual interest networks, 3 study committees, an elementary science training program, grant-writing teams of school personnel and university faculty, and a monthly newsletter distributed to all 4,500 regional educators.

The heart of the center's mission is professional growth for educators throughout their careers. Programs and services incorporate principles of adult learning and thrive on the energy released when educators connect with and learn from one another. The center's activities reflect the belief that collegial interaction facilitates professional growth.

A Structure of Cooperation

The innovative structure of the Regional Staff Development Center encourages teacher participation at all levels. Activities are coordinated by a permanent director, 4 Center Associates, 26 Program Coordinators, and 103 Contact Teachers.

Center associates are experienced classroom teachers on leave from their districts to spend a year working full time at the center. Associates are selected to represent a cross section of the center's membership with regard to grade level and geographic location. Under the guidance of the director, the associates work together closely to build their skills in facilitating support groups, leading group discussions, making presentations, writing grants, and producing the monthly newsletter.

The center's organizational structure has expanded as the numbers of members and programs have grown. Every support group (alliance, network, or study committee) has at least one program coordinator, who organizes and facilitates the activities of the group with the help of the center associates. The center associates support, counsel, and lead while learning from the program coordinators through involvement with other disciplines and grade levels and exposure to recent research.

Contact teachers are the direct link between schools and the center. Each of the 90 school buildings served by the center has one or two contact teachers. These teachers are responsible for all communications to and from the center, including distribution of the monthly newsletter; they also serve as in-house advocates of center activities, sharing their knowledge of programs and encouraging participation.

Alliances and Networks

The center's collaborative efforts cross geographic and grade-level barriers. Many of the programs are alliances or networks, similar in design but different in focus. An alliance is a group of school and university/college faculty who meet together regularly as "communities of scholars" to share experiences, knowledge, and interests in their common disciplines.[1] Center alliances have been established in the subject areas of art, biology, chemistry-physics, dramatic arts, drafting, elementary science, English, foreign languages, general science, home economics, math, music, psychology, and social studies.

Networks, on the other hand, operate as professional idea exchanges among educators with mutual interests or common challenges. Networks already formed are the Beginning

Teacher Support Group, Computers in Education, Counselors, Exceptional Education, Library/Media, and Middle-Level Educators.

The collegiality resulting from educators' sharing their knowledge and love of subject matter has transcended the levels at which they teach. School and college faculty meet as colleagues to identify their needs and concerns and to design ways to improve the quality of their intellectual and professional lives. Because alliances and networks are organized by their own members, no two are alike; a number of commonalities exist in that these groups have program coordinators and planning committees, set goals for themselves, and draw membership across levels and the region.

At a recent Physics/Chemistry Alliance meeting a college professor showed alliance members how he demonstrates the mirage phenomenon in his classroom. During the follow-up discussion an elementary teacher suggested an alternative approach, which the professor enthusiastically accepted. The sense of professionalism and collegial respect is an important by-product of such an exchange of ideas.

How do alliances and networks get started? A steering committee convened by the center plans a "kick-off" event which reaches out to all educators in a specific discipline or interest area. For example, the Math Alliance began with a dinner meeting open to all math educators in the area. The guest speaker, a local elementary principal, led a discussion on cooperative learning that appealed to the full range of teaching levels represented, elementary through postsecondary.

From the surveys completed at that initial Math Alliance gathering, the planning committee set themes for successive meetings hosted by various schools in the region. Each meeting had a special focus. At one, the participants shared lesson plans and favorite techniques for teaching difficult math concepts. At another, they explored a variety of problem-solving activities for use in math classes. As a closure activity for the academic year, the planning committee established goals for the following year.

Through alliances and networks, members help each other maintain the spirit of inquiry crucial to the healthy intellectual life of all faculty members, regardless of the age of their students. One teacher recently commented on her participation, "The science alliance has given me new skills and fresh enthusiasm for my entire job—not just in teaching science. It's been a cool glass of water on a hot, dusty road. Really hits the spot!"

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Study Committees

Classroom teachers rarely get the opportunity to analyze and then act on the conditions affecting their professional lives. Study committees are one vehicle to help teachers escape the intellectual stagnation and isolation that often plague their daily workplaces. As an elementary teacher said after an all-day meeting of a study committee, "I came away with a feeling of pride. I was treated as an intelligent adult. It was wonderful to spend a day sharing ideas with 'adults.' I went home refreshed and eager to go to school the next day."

For six months, the Regional Staff Development Center worked with an

interdistrict committee of teachers, school board members, and administrators to develop an induction plan for beginning teachers. From this Beginning Teacher Study Committee a comprehensive program emerged: a pilot induction program, a series of support seminars on topics relevant to first-year teachers, and a set of beginning teacher orientation guidelines for administrators. These tangible outcomes were important to committee members, but the collegial relationships that developed during the study committee's deliberations exceeded everyone's expectations. Working together on a common concern blurred the lines of authority among administrators, teachers, and board members. Teachers found it stimulating, board members learned more about the needs of teachers, and administrators were reminded of the everyday demands on classroom teachers.

A second study committee evolved when a humanities professor came to the center concerned about her students' lack of knowledge of different cultures, even within their own community. Her college students were unable to understand, much less discuss, the issues of cross-cultural communication. Center staff responded by inviting educators with teaching experience in multicultural settings to meet and react to this problem.

The Cross-Cultural Study Committee has now met for two years to address this complex issue; it has produced a human relations handbook for teachers, *Educating for Cultural Understanding*. This compilation of knowledge and collegial research is an effort to start cross-cultural communication at the elementary level and continue it through high school. Overcoming the isolation of these teachers and enhancing their pride in themselves are by-products of this collaboration. As one member said, "I thought this would be just one more meeting at the end of a long day, but every time I leave, I'm recharged! I look forward to school the next day, wanting to share the discussion with my co-workers. It's so nice to feel like a professional!"

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Specialized Roles Lead to Learning

Beyond the collegial learning inherent in support groups, special interactive leadership roles assumed by educators through the Regional Staff Development Center are rich in professional growth opportunities.

The responsibilities of center associates and program coordinators require these teachers to learn as well as lead. Working together to facilitate staff development for all teachers in the two counties, center associates gain an understanding of the "big picture" in education by discovering the joys and challenges of teachers, administrators, and board members. Program coordinators meet occasionally as a group to discuss their particular programs and to encourage each other. Learning styles of adults and leadership skills are topics of discussion. Both center associate and program coordinator positions provide leadership experience and professional growth opportunities.

Through the center's pilot induction program, experienced teachers serve as mentors for beginning teachers. Mentors introduce beginning teachers to the building and the faculty, help them learn the curriculum, provide appropriate feedback on particular teaching skills, and impart "tricks of the trade." Mentors benefit from these relationships as well, learning new approaches and sometimes reevaluating their own styles.

Grant writing, often an outcome of a study committee, gives classroom teachers the opportunity to experience still another new role through the center. In contributing their expertise to the development of the proposal, teachers remind university faculty of the realities of the classroom.

Collegiality, Then Ownership

The philosophy and structure of the center capitalize on local expertise and energy. This structure of cooperation affords 4,500 Wisconsin educators the opportunity to learn from each other through alliances, networks, study committees, and specialized roles. A teacher hears about center activities from a co-worker, knows they have the support of building and district administration, and uses the opportunity to learn from colleagues with similar experience or interests. The Regional Staff Development Center attributes its success to the spirit of collegiality and sense of ownership displayed by its members.□

1. The academic alliances developed by the center are modeled after the national project begun by Claire Gaudiani, University of Pennsylvania, Director of the Academic Alliance project funded by the Exxon Education Foundation.

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