SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT: WEIDNER SCHOOL OF INQUIRY

Introduction and Context

Weidner School of Inquiry (WSOI) is a 9 -12th grade New Tech Network school, co-located on the Plymouth High School campus, in the Plymouth Community School Corporation of Plymouth, Indiana. With an enrollment of approximately 315 students, WSOI is now it its 4th year of operation as a New Tech Network school. Using a unique co-director model, former WSOI teachers Jennifer Felke and Michael Delp took over leadership of the school at the start of the 2013-14 school year and have continued in that role ever since. As one of four NTN schools in the corporation, WSOI teachers and administrators also play a large role in supporting alignment within the K-12 New Tech pathway available to students in their community. Over the past three years, a focus on delivering high-quality, community-connected project-based learning (PBL) has driven much of the school's work.

The Implementation Process

Having served as a New Tech Network Demonstration Site the past two years, the school's implementation of NTN practices are now operating at level high enough for them to serve as a model for others inside and outside of their school corporation. However, this does not mean that implementation has come easy or that there haven't been significant challenges along the way. As a co-located school that shares resources and relationships with the larger Plymouth High School, they've had to carefully navigate the development of their own independent culture to ensure that it doesn't create issues with the larger campus. After a tough first year of trying to find their identity while shifting mindsets around instructional expectations, Jennifer and Michael started the 2nd year with an explicit focus on WSOI's purpose or "why" for becoming a New Tech school. Using Simon Sinek's Golden Circle theory as a guide, as a staff they discussed their goals for students and how their PBL instructional model was aimed at meeting those goals. Even now, three years later, they still revisit their "why" whenever they hire new staff or when it feels as though the team is losing sight of their purpose. At the same time, Jennifer and Michael understand that they must constantly work at maintaining a staff culture in which it's acceptable for staff to share when they believe that something isn't working or isn't aligned with their stated purpose.

"We have to be transparent when we aren't in agreement about something. You can't let things fester. However, we also need to recognize that some things are going to be hard. We must understand that, in order to be successful, we must learn to be ok with being uncomfortable."

- Grant Masson, WSOI Social Studies Teacher

Organized Support Structures

The WSOI staff have also become adept at leveraging their strengths and resources in their efforts to implement effective instructional practices. They have developed a leadership team that any teacher can join to discuss and make decisions on school-based needs. Jennifer and Michael are quick to acknowledge that they "don't have all the answers" and rely heavily on the input of staff when working to resolve complex challenges. For the teachers, this approach to shared decision making and a "flat leadership" model has created a strong sense of shared ownership over the direction of the school.

Prior to working at WSOI, Jennifer Felke was a teacher-leader at a New Tech school in a neighboring district. The staff leaned heavily on Jennifer's prior experience as a PBL facilitator to help them gauge whether early growing pains were "normal" or worthy of deep concern. In addition, they have used their assigned NTN Coach to help them understand their needs and potential solution more clearly.

"Early on, our New Tech coach, Sarah, really helped us understand our system more completely. She was able to 'get on the balcony' with us, allowing us to see opportunities that we weren't able to see before."

- Michael Delp, WSOI Co-Director

One of those opportunities that has been particularly impactful is the use of a shared prep space for all teachers. The challenge of establishing their own dedicated time for staff learning has been hard to overcome. WSOI teachers often travel between classrooms instead of having their own dedicated room. By creating a shared prep space, teachers have been able to collaborate in many unexpected and organic ways. When visiting this space, it is not uncommon to see teachers giving impromptu feedback on ideas or using the Critical Friends Peer Review protocol to critique curriculum plans. This is in addition to recurring opportunities for Critical Friends Peer Review critique scheduled during lunch, for anyone that has requested feedback.

Due to the limited time that the school staff has to meet as a team, they have invested heavily in individual support structures that ensure every staff member is able to meet the expectations for implementing high-quality project-based (PBL) or problem-based (PrBL) learning. Encouraging the use of NTN's badging pathway for NTN Teacher Certification through public celebration (see image below), with the support of their NTN Certified Trainer, has helped to provide a personalized approach to professional development.

When they do have opportunities to meet as a staff for professional development, co-directors Felke and Delp work to ensure that the time spent is balanced between sharing information and making decisions, or working together to improve instructional practice. To manage that balance, they've used a template for developing staff meeting agendas that helps keep them from spending too much time on any one area (see table below).

Example Staff Meeting Agenda (60 minutes)	
Connection Time	The Power of Positive Notes
Resource / Discussion	Tips for Using Groups in Echo
Resource / Discussion	Critical Friends of Government Project
Information	Prom Updates Upcoming Safety Drill PL@NTN Event - Next Week

Looking Ahead

Knowing that specific and intentional improvement in student learning requires structures that support cycles of inquiry around relevant data sources, the WSOI team is focusing this year (2016-17) on implementing protocols for Looking at Student Work and analyzing data that will help reveal student needs more clearly. This will likely push harder on their time constraints and agenda structures, so those informal opportunities for feedback and individualized support will seemingly be even more critical for them to maintain.

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