Is Collaborative PD Time Being Wasted in Schools?

By Anthony Rebora

Team meetings—as conducted by professional learning communities or data groups, for example—have become an increasingly important component of teacher professional development in many schools. Yet some evidence suggests that such meetings are often not well-executed and that many teachers are not highly satisfied with the format.

To find out more about what makes school-based meetings work well—and why they often don’t—Education Week talked to Kathryn Parker Boudett, a lecturer on education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the co-author, with Elizabeth A. City, of Meeting Wise: Making the Most of Collaborative Time for Educators (Harvard Education Press, 2014). The interview has been edited for space and clarity.

You are known for your work on Data Wise, a book using assessment results to improve learning. Why did you feel that you needed to follow that with a book about meetings?

After we put Data Wise out into the world, we followed up with schools to see what was happening, and it seemed like some
places were getting really strong traction with the model. But there were other schools where the process seemed to kind of fizzle. So we tried to push on that and figure out what was going on, and we saw in the schools that were making progress, there was a discipline and a culture not just around being collaborative but around using meeting time well. But in the places where teams just sort of got together and didn’t have a clear vision of how they were going to use every minute they had for this—those folks were really struggling. The good news is that, as we worked with schools, we found that using meeting time better was a teachable skill. So we have a growth mindset around this aspect of the work as well.

**Collaboration has become such a central part of teacher professional development in the last several years—particularly with the growth of professional learning communities and other teams. Why do you think that has happened?**

I think there are two reasons. One is that the challenge we’ve set for ourselves in education is more vast and difficult than what it used to be. Teaching has become more complex, and the idea that we now want to drive across-the-board improvement and consciously prepare all kids to be successful in life—it’s just a taller order than what we’ve had in the past. And when problems get really big, they can become too difficult for any one person to solve on their own.

The other aspect is the idea that you will get better solutions if you put more minds on a problem. I actually wasn’t always quite sure about this myself, but I’ve seen both personally and in the work we do in schools that it’s pretty true across the board. Getting other people’s ideas, especially perspectives from someone who’s going to bring to the data different assumptions and kind of jolt you a little into thinking in new ways of defining a problem or crafting a solution—that really does make it easier to address important challenges.

**In the book, you say that time for adult learning is being wasted in many schools—at a cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars in some cases. How did you arrive at that figure?**

It’s the idea of opportunity costs—there’s actually a worksheet in the book to help people figure that out. Districts have already invested in teachers’ salaries in their budgets each year—so that money has been spent. But how teachers use their hours devoted to the profession will determine whether the money was spent well.

So if you got five teachers in a room every Wednesday for an hour, and they end up talking about where they should go on their next field trip or about a student that’s driving them crazy and whether it’s the family’s fault—some conversation that’s not really solution-oriented—that’s effectively lost money. If nothing productive is happening in that period of time, then that hour of each teacher’s time is being wasted.

But let me be clear that this is not about blaming teachers who are involved in ineffective meetings. The teachers we talk to are usually the first ones to say, “Oh my God, these meetings go on and on,” or “It’s a waste of my time,” or “It’s keeping me from the teaching that I love.” We need to be listening to the people who are closest to the work—and so often they tell us that in-
school meetings aren’t working. And by the same token, teachers are often the most enthusiastic when they experience meetings that are well-run—where there’s a clear agenda and objectives, and all voices are being heard, and they’re taking notes to document decisions and tracking the time so that discussions don’t drag on.

**What can schools and teachers themselves do to improve the impact of meetings or collaboration time? What would be first steps?**

I think the first thing is to set expectations for what effective meetings are going to look like. And there are a number of ways you can do that. In the book, we have a meeting-agenda template, as well as a meeting-agenda checklist schools can use. The point is not to follow that particular template letter for letter, but to have a conversation and make a decision around what you think meetings are going to look like.

But that only gets you so far. We also think it’s important for people to experience or at least see an effective meeting so that they get a sense of that “aha” around what makes this kind of meeting different.

There are a number of ways to do that, too. For example, we have an **Intro to Data Wise MOOC** on the Harvard edX platform—it’s free and self-paced, so I feel comfortable mentioning it. In the course, we include for each of the steps a little piece of a meeting in which our team is doing something relevant to that step. So if it’s Step Four where you dig into student data, we show people looking at a piece of student work, and you can see what a meeting around that looks like. The feedback we’re getting from people who’ve taken that course is that’s really helpful to have those visuals, so they’re able to say “Oh, that’s how they talk to one another,” or “That’s the way they kind of call one another out if they’re missing a norm,” or “That’s how they stay really evidence-based in their meetings and don’t get kind of off into judgmental conversations that would shut people down.”

**What would you say are the hallmarks of really good collaborative adult learning—of a PD meeting of this sort? What do you look for when you evaluate meetings in schools?**

Actually, the first thing is seeing people on the edge of their chairs. I’m not sure if that’s something that’s quantifiable, but seeing people leaning into the conversation, really listening and excited is a good sign. You know, adult learning and student learning have a lot of similarities, and people learn best when they care about the outcome, when they really feel invested and excited about it. So in good school meetings, there needs to be that sense of “we’re doing something really important here, and I want to be part of this.”

Then there is the clarity of purpose—that’s so huge. It should be clear to anyone sitting in on a meeting, even a stranger, what it is that the group is trying to get done. You also have a sense that the prep work has been done before the meeting. We’ve all been to meetings where people are giving you login information or working you through a set of procedures. And you think, “Wow, there had to be a better way of getting this information across without having a meeting.” So, in a
good meeting, that stuff has been taken care of beforehand via email or whatever, and you have a sense of why it was important to bring this group of people together in real time at that moment.

Lastly, I’d look for good pacing and facilitation—that the leader, with the help of the participants, is being really clear about how much time they think is going to be needed for objectives to be met and then adjusting in the moment if necessary. I want to see if there’s a skilled facilitator who has an eye on the meeting as it’s unfolding and is being really kind of metacognitive about what’s happening and whether they’re going off-track and whether that’s OK or not.

Oh, and having a designated note-taker, on a rotating basis, should not be underestimated as a factor in good meetings. When people get good at documenting their meetings, particularly in digital form, they begin to amass the evidence of the progress that they are making. Good meetings leave a virtual “paper trail” that shows what really got done.