

Blog Post: What? Another day off?

By Bil Zarch
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This guest post is by Bil Zarch, head of school at Lander-Grinspoon Academy in Northampton, Massachusetts. LGA is a partner school in phase two of the Mandel Center's Induction Partnership.

Some parents may have grumbled when our students had another day off recently, but it was probably the most important day off that students have taken in a long time. While they were resting and relaxing, our faculty was deeply immersed in the work of creating a document for a "Vision of Good Teaching" at LGA.

This isn't just a one-day, months-long, or even year-long project. It is a multifaceted, ongoing collaboration that is taking our school on a journey to even higher places, as we focus on the question, "How do we make schools a place for teacher learning?"

Why is this important? Because schools where teachers are continuously learning are schools where student learning is maximized.

We haven't been doing this work alone. It is through our time spent with the Mandel Center that we have really shaped this vision for good teaching. Mandel Center researchers have politely but firmly been pushing an agenda forward that is in groove with ours as a school.

Many elementary schools (and especially LGA) are places that are generally pleasant, polite places to work. For the most part, faculty members treat each other with the utmost respect. When it comes to their work, they have interacted with each other in rather perfunctory ways—exchanging niceties, never observing each other's classrooms, and assuming that every lesson, from every teacher, every day, is adequate.

Over the past three years we have started to break down this rather blind vision. We now say our doors are open to learning for everyone in the building. We must do as good a job on our teachers' learning as we do on our students'. It can't be a one-sided proposition. We are now focusing on the differences between "niceness," "judgement," and "inquiry." As a faculty, we are focus more on inquiry. In small groups, we started by studying a text entitled "Developing Practice, Developing Practitioners," by Deborah Ball and David Cohen. In this article, the authors talk about having "to un-learn the politeness norm that dominates most current teacher discourse." By nature, we want to be collegial. It's the "nice thing to do." It's part of our school culture—but that does not always promote learning.

So how do we become a faculty that takes inquiry seriously? We are attempting to hone our skills by splitting into small groups who do "rounds" of observation of each other. We acknowledge that it will be a complicated scheduling task, but it will be worth it.

Just as when doctors practice rounds, our teachers will explore deeply why certain teacher moves are used. There will be exacting protocols for discussion, and time set aside for teachers to inquire about the lesson. The teacher will have an opportunity to reflect on what

he/she thought went well, and what didn't go as anticipated. When we seek medical attention, we appreciate that doctors are continually self-improving and staying on top of the latest findings even after years of practicing medicine. Shouldn't we hope for the same for our teachers? — Video: How a thoughtful induction process can transform a school.

Visions of Good Teaching: Continuing and Extending Our Work

Goals: Faculty Will...

- Know that the way faculty interacts can either enable growth or serve as an obstacle.

- Be able to identify 3 categories of communication norms: "niceness", "inquiry", and "judgement" as well as language that signals these norms.

- Be able to articulate a more nuanced and specific vision of the elements developed last year.

- Know the purpose, structure, and potential benefits of **Rounds**

- Be able to distinguish between description and evaluation