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Introducing Whole-Faculty Study Groups

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There is an old saying, “I didn’t know what one was, and now I am one.” That saying pretty much describes Whole-Faculty Study Groups as professional learning communities. Whole-Faculty Study Groups (WFSGs) did not begin as whole-faculty study groups. WFSGs began in 1987 as a part of a training design to support all of the teachers at a school who were implementing new teaching strategies in their classrooms. We wanted every student in the school to perform at higher levels. WFSGs began before they had a name. They also began before the phrase *professional learning communities* was the Number 1 topic in educational journals, conference presentations, and books. What seemed to us a commonsense strategy in 1987 is now “the thing to do.” A few state departments of education have even gone so far as to mandate that schools have some form of professional learning community in place in schools. We have gone from hearing early in the WFSG work that “expecting every teacher in a school to be a member of a study group was undemocratic and unrealistic” to hearing today that “you (leaders in WFSG schools) are only doing what the research says to do.” Guess what? We were the groundbreakers in research on professional learning communities (Joyce, Murphy, Showers, & Murphy, 1989; Murphy, 1992, 1995; Murphy, Murphy, Joyce, & Showers, 1988; Showers, Murphy, & Joyce, 1996). We are proud of the work we have done, and we are even

prouder that we have remained true to our purpose in having a whole-faculty form of study groups focused on student needs. Twenty years later, WFSGs are still a structure to support teachers implementing new materials and strategies in their classrooms to address specific instructional needs. We have not shifted our focus, even though we have adjusted a few of our procedures based on feedback from schools. However, we have not lessened our expectations. Over the years, we have strengthened our spirit and our will to make the WFSG process one that exists for the *benefit of students*. This chapter unfolds a professional overview of the WFSG System and its application to create professional learning communities, improve schools, and enhance student learning.

WFSG SYSTEM DEFINED

The WFSG System is a job-embedded, self-directed, student-driven approach to professional development. It is a professional development system designed to build communities of learners in which professionals continuously strive to improve schools and increase student learning. This is accomplished by practitioners: (a) deepening their own knowledge and understanding of what is taught, (b) reflecting on their practices, (c) sharpening their skills, and (d) taking joint responsibility for the students they teach.

“Whole-faculty” means that every faculty member at the school is a member of a study group focusing on data-driven student instructional needs. In such a context, a study group is a small number of individuals, three to five, joining together to increase their capacities to enable students to reach higher levels of performance. The collective synergy of all the study groups advances the whole school.

The essence of the WFSG system resides in the following two “grounding” or “fundamental” questions:

- What do students need for teachers to do so that teachers will have a deeper understanding of what they teach?
- What do students need for teachers to do so that teachers will be more skillful in how they teach?

WFSGs are student based! Consequently, the “essential” or “overarching” question that guides the WFSG system is:

What are our students learning and achieving as a result of what we are learning and doing in our study group?

WFSG PRINCIPLES

The WFSG system is based on the following five guiding principles:

1. *Students are first.* WFSGs provide an approach to staff development that overtly puts the needs of students first. The theme “what do students need for us to do” runs throughout the WFSG books (Murphy & Lick, 1998, 2001, 2005) and throughout the WFSG process. Teachers in WFSG schools routinely examine student work collaboratively, listen to students, observe students in each others’ classrooms,

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and pay attention to a wide variety of student data. The *student voice* is heard and is the factor that makes what teachers do in study groups authentic.

2. *Everyone participates.* Every certificated person is a member of a study group with three to five members. Members of a study group may: teach at the same grade level or at different grade levels, teach in the same department or in different departments, and be special area teachers or regular classroom teachers. If teaching assistants have instructional responsibilities, they may also be members of study groups with teachers, or they may form study groups that have only teaching assistants as members. In some schools, nonteaching personnel form study groups to investigate ways they can support the instructional programs. Principals most often are members of study groups with other principals.

3. *Leadership is shared.* Every member of a study group serves as leader on a rotating basis. An *instructional council* consists of a representative from each study group and meets every four to six weeks as the primary study-group communication network. Members of study groups also rotate in attending council meetings.

4. *Responsibility is equal.* No one person in a study group is more responsible for the work than any other person. Everyone is equally responsible for every aspect of the group's work. Group norms are established at the first meeting, and every member holds every other member responsible for respecting and adhering to the norms.

5. *The work is public.* All the work of study groups is *public*. Action plans are posted in the school on clipboards or electronically. This is also true for the study group logs. Any teacher can ask a teacher in another study group about the work of a group. There are whole-faculty sharing times and printed summaries of what every group is doing. Sharing study group work is on the agendas of faculty meetings, grade-level meetings, and department meetings.

THE WFSG SYSTEM AND STUDENT NEEDS

The WFSG System is grounded in student instructional needs. The system is governed by a WFSG Decision-Making Cycle (DMC; see Murphy & Lick, 2005, p. 109). The DMC is a seven-step process. In Steps 1 through 4, the whole faculty meets to analyze student data and to specify student needs that study groups will address. Steps 5 through 7 occur after the study groups are formed and work begins.

WFSG PROCEDURAL GUIDELINES

The WFSG system is a framework or structure consisting of fifteen procedural or process guidelines. The guidelines make the expectations clear and also manage the group dynamics, defining relationships and behavioral norms. Study groups that routinely use the Checklist for Procedural Guidelines (Murphy & Lick, 2005, pp. 87–101, 239) to confirm adherence to the operational rules are much less likely to go astray.

THE WFSG RUBRIC

A rubric for WFSGs is presented in Chapter 10. This rubric analyzes the WFSG System and describes the expected behaviors. The rubric is divided into three components: Context, Process, and Content.

WFSGs for Whole School Improvement

Making the school better for all students is a constant function of every study group in the school. It is the collective energy and synergy generated from the study groups that propel the school forward. In particular, a student does not excel as a middle-school student because he or she had a great fourth-grade teacher. The more likely reason is because the student had outstanding learning opportunities as a kindergartener and first through fifth grader. Similarly, the middle school continues to excel because the students' teachers have an extensive repertoire and are masters of their content. The cumulative effect of good teaching over years of schooling produces a graduate who does well and can be expected to continue as a learner. When every teacher in a school is in a study group that targets effective teaching practices, an important range of schoolwide needs can be met. To focus on a schoolwide need, data and the effectiveness of curricula must be examined from all grades. For example, the fourth grade is not singled out because it is the grade in which the state tests are administered. If the standardized tests administered in the fourth grade indicate that reading comprehension is a problem, then that is a problem for all grades in the school.

In forming WFSGs, the faculty goes through a process of analyzing student and school data to identify student needs that study groups will address. When the needs are determined, groups form based on these needs. Each group then determines what its members will do when the group meets to address a specific student need. Often, this means examining what will enable teachers to use new and refined instructional practices and materials effectively in the classroom. Teachers also decide how they will support each other and the use, at the impact level, of new practices and materials. As study groups implement new and more effective practices and materials, each classroom improves, resulting in improvement in the whole school.

The goal of WFSGs is to focus the entire school faculty on creating, implementing, and integrating effective teaching and learning practices into school programs that will result in an increase in student learning and a decrease in negative behaviors of students, as reflected in related, relevant data sources.

WFSGs bring individual and institutional needs together in an organizational setting. Teachers become more skillful, knowledgeable, and confident as their study groups progress and gain competence and as their students become more skillful, knowledgeable, and confident. The power in the WFSG process rests in the promise that teachers will become more knowledgeable and skillful at doing what will result in higher levels of student learning. Study groups that function simply to satisfy interests of group members often lack adequate content focus to boost the goal of the school. The primary goal of schools is to meet student needs; therefore, it is the collective energy and synergy from the study groups and the whole faculty that propels the effectiveness of the school forward.

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To our knowledge, the documented effects of study groups on students and the learning environment are limited to situations involving WFSGs' focusing on instruction. Schools that have successfully implemented the WFSG approach have many differences, such as those reflected in student age and level, location (e.g., rural vs. urban), socioeconomic circumstances, and size. Even with the many demographic differences in schools, we have not seen such factors make significant differences in how adults in schools work together in study groups.

Presenting the WFSG System to a Faculty

Faculties resist beginning "another new thing." The feeling of overload is so strongly felt by teachers that there is an immediate, automatic negative response to any new structure added to the already full day. WFSGs are presented as a way to facilitate what the teachers already have to do. Teachers already must design lessons using new curricula. In study groups, teachers work together on designing lessons using new curricula. Points that strengthen the cause for a new collaborative structure are that WFSGs are:

- A vehicle for collaboratively doing what teachers have been doing alone
- A structure for implementing the School Improvement Plan or a process for ensuring that targeted school goals are being addressed
- A structure totally devoted to how teachers teach and what teachers teach
- A place to work on the work of teaching and learning
- Not another program to be implemented in the classroom

The above points have softened the most entrenched resisters. However, the biggest hurdle by far is finding time for study groups to meet within the contract day. Within the past few years, more districts and schools are finding ways to release teachers for professional development. When we started this work in 1986, we could find very few, if any, schools that found time within the school day for teachers to collaborate. In 1994, the first school in Georgia to release students one hour early on Wednesdays for teachers to engage in professional development was a school implementing WFSGs in Americus, Georgia.

WFSG Results

Where properly implemented, the WFSG process has been unusually successful in facilitating schoolwide change and enhancing student learning (see, e.g., Joyce et al., 1989; Murphy, 1992, 1995; Murphy & Lick, 1998, 2001, 2005; and other chapters in this book, e.g., Chapter 5 and 7). The driving force in the WFSG process is its self-directed, synergistic comentoring learning teams (see Lick, 1999a, 2000, 2006). Such teams creatively:

1. Produce learning communities and set common goals, support member interdependence, empower participants, and foster active participation.
2. Plan and learn together.
3. Engage broad principles of education that modify perspectives, policies, and practices.

4. Construct subject-matter knowledge.
5. Immerse everyone in sustained work with ideas, materials, and colleagues.
6. Cultivate action researchers, producing, evaluating, and applying relevant research.
7. Struggle with fundamental questions of what teachers and students must learn, know, and apply (Murphy & Lick, 2005, p. 13).

The focusing question for study groups is: What is happening differently in the classroom as a result of what you are doing and learning in study groups? With that vision, “study groups are motivated, work harder, and take responsibility for the successful implementation of required processes and procedures” (Murphy & Lick, 1998, p. 18). The benefits include the following:

- Improvement is seen in the student needs areas that study groups target
- Culture shifts from isolation to collaboration
- Data are prominent in making instructional decisions
- Principals are more instructionally focused
- New teachers are in comentoring groups surrounded by support
- Teachers see themselves as action researchers
- New instructional initiatives are implemented sooner and more thoroughly
- Multiple initiatives are more coherent and integrated for maximum effects
- All teachers are viewed as leaders
- Behavioral norms for faculty become standard
- Looking at student work in collaborative settings becomes the norm
- Teachers take full responsibility for students represented in a study group

General Success Factors

WFSGs, by themselves, have little power to change anything. They are only a structure, a set of guidelines. The WFSG System is a job-embedded approach that gives teachers the opportunity to focus on specific student needs and how to reduce those needs. WFSGs are like a basket. The basket is only as good as what is put in the basket (e.g., guided reading) and where the goods are taken (e.g., classroom). The heart of the WFSG System is what teachers do to develop understanding of what they teach, what teachers do to become more knowledgeable about what they teach, what teachers investigate, and what teachers do to become more skillful in the classroom with students. Those “whats” are the content of study groups, and without appropriate content, the process is empty. Without intellectually rigorous work, the process is boring and can be a waste of time. It is substantive teacher work that requires teachers to immerse themselves in searching for deeper understandings of what they teach that creates high-performing, motivated study groups.

Members of WFSGs determine what they are going to do when study groups meet. If the work is boring, they determined it to be boring. If the time spent in study groups is a waste of time, they determined it to be a waste of time. If they determined it to be meaningful work, they determined it to be meaningful work. We have heard teachers blame course instructors, workshop leaders, and guest speakers for disappointing and uninspiring professional development. In WFSGs, members of study groups hold the key to either disappointing or inspiring work!

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The WFSG process, centered around multi-level synergistic comentoring study groups is, in fact, a massive change management process. It is one of the most practical and effective approaches presently available in the literature.

In particular, the study-group process dramatically increases:

1. *Focus on imperative changes*, as determined by school personnel.
2. *Change sponsorship effectiveness*, both project and schoolwide.
3. *Preparation of change agents*, including the principal, faculty, and others.
4. *Commitment of targets and the reduction of resistance*.
5. *Positive advocacy*, including that of the school board, superintendent, principal, faculty, students, parents, and others from the general community.
6. *Individual, group, and school resilience*, enhancing stakeholders' change-adaptability.
7. *Knowledge of change and change principles for stakeholders*.
8. *Organized processes for transition*, including integrated, cocreative learning experiences that are teacher- and student-centered, experimental and research-oriented, reflective, supportive, and inspiring.
9. *Group synergy, comentoring, and learning team development*, setting new school operational and relationship norms for action research and improving learning systems.
10. *School and educational culture modification*, allowing a critical reexamination of basic assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors and required learning systems and practices (Lick, 2000; Mullen & Lick, 1999).

The WFSG process, through the above ten elements for leading and managing change, generates collective and inspiring vision and creates a high level of synergy and comentoring, allowing substantive learning, change, and continuous improvement to become the norm in the school workplace and culture.

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE MEETINGS

Even though the WFSG system may appear to be centered on study-group meetings, it is not. The system's heart is what teachers do between meetings. This may be the major difference between WFSG and other professional learning communities' designs. Think of a heart monitor. If groups meet, meet, meet, with little or no action in between the meetings, it is like the beep, beep, beep sound a heart monitor makes when someone dies or the flat lines that appear on the screen. When a patient is alive and well, the monitor shows a "▲" between beeps or between the flat lines. In WFSG, the upward movement is the action between meetings. A study group meets to plan and reflect; members go into their classrooms and take action on what was planned; the group meets to plan and reflect on what happened in the classroom; members go into their classrooms and take action on what was planned; the group

meets to plan and reflect on what happened in the classroom; members go into their classrooms and take action on what was planned. The WFSG monitor looks like:



The meetings have no value without the action that occurs when members are in their classrooms. If meetings are boring, most often it is because members are not basing their work on what they do in their classrooms. The more action there is in the classrooms, the more meaningful are the meetings.

SUMMARY

The writers of the chapters in this book have presented the WFSG System from all directions and perspectives. They have magnified the weaknesses as well as the strengths. We did not attempt to temper their words. Some readers may focus on the weaknesses and use those negatives as a reason for not moving forward in determining whether WFSGs are right for their school. Some readers may focus on the strengths and positives of the WFSG System and want to know more about how to get started. The complexity of the WFSG System is made obvious through the examination of the WFSG Rubric, discussed in Chapter 10. Integrating WFSGs into an established, traditional school has many challenges and many rewards. As we have said before and repeat here: such work can lead to powerful results, but it is not for the fainthearted!