

Wyoming Education Summit

White Paper Findings and Proposals 2012

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INTRODUCTION

In September 2012 a group of 45 National Board Certified Teachers met at the Ucross Ranch near Buffalo, Wyoming to discuss educational topics relevant to our state and form the first Wyoming Education Summit. The Wyoming Education Summit was funded by the John P. Ellbogen Foundation. Significant in-kind contributions were made by the Ucross Foundation and the Apache Corporation.

The goal of the Wyoming Education Summit was to have an open discussion about the system of education and teacher effectiveness in Wyoming. It is vital that the improvement and renewal of our education system take into account the demands placed on citizens in our democracy and for teachers to have a voice in that discussion. This Summit was an opportunity for Wyoming teachers to share their ideas and experiences around the following specific topics:

1. Entry into the profession – including preparation, pathways, public perception and compensation
2. Student Learning – including effectiveness, technology and class size
3. School Organization – including leadership and responsibilities
4. Teacher as Learner – including evaluation practice and professional development
5. Leadership and Advocacy

Through this discussion it was apparent that the desire of the 2012 Wyoming Education Summit participants is to see Wyoming established as the national leader in attracting and retaining high-quality, well-prepared teachers while developing and maintaining effective professional growth.

The goal of this white paper is to convey to the public and Wyoming's elected officials the collected thoughts and conclusions gathered from the 2012 Wyoming Education Summit. There were common conceptions that threaded through each of the different discussion topics and which are presented in this paper as ten proposals. These ten proposals are inter-dependent, at times purposefully nebulous in detail, and centered around three of the five discussion topics.

It is the opinion of participants in the 2012 Wyoming Education Summit that the University of Wyoming's College of Education, the Wyoming Professional Teaching Standards Board, and the Wyoming Department of Education are best positioned to work in unison with teachers to flesh out these actionable ideas in realistic and feasible means. The authors invite readers to discuss the proposals in further detail with any of the participants identified at the end of this paper.

PROPOSALS

Entry into the Profession

All Teaching Candidates Trained In Literacy Strategies

The first proposal is perhaps the most simple to put into effect. Reading and writing are essential to the success of every 21st century citizen and indeed essential to the survival of our democracy. It is the belief of Summit participants that literacy is the responsibility of every educator and that teaching reading and writing should not be limited to the language arts curriculum. Participants propose that every College of Education (COE) graduate be able to effectively teach content-specific literacy strategies.

Pre-Service Teachers Receive More Classroom Experience

The second proposal is a restructuring of the pre-service preparation program by creating an apprenticeship program for pre-service teacher candidates in order to increase the number of classroom experience hours. It is the view of Summit attendees, most of whom have served as mentors to student teachers, that pre-service teachers need more time in the classroom designing lessons for actual students and cohesively implementing the multiple aspects of teaching. The following is a sample model of how the apprenticeship program could be structured.

The apprenticeship program could span a three-year period under the tutelage of multiple supervising teachers as part of a 5½-year university program resulting in a master's degree. The student teaching experience would not be replaced, only augmented by more extensive time spent both observing classrooms and collaborating in classrooms. Each supervising teacher would meet university requirements, including a course provided by the College of Education which prepares them specifically for the task of mentoring, monitoring, and advising these pre-service teaching candidates.

As a part of this apprenticeship program, we propose that curricular specific methods courses be taught by the supervising teachers in the context of the classroom. Authentic lessons and instructional sequences would be prepared for real students with live experimentation in learning styles and classroom management. Lessons would be video-recorded and analyzed together with the supervising teacher while taking into account the actual student learning as observed in their students' formative and summative assessments. As part of the pre-service teaching candidates' summative assessment they would complete something similar to a National Board Certification entry, including a video component, complete with analysis. This could be in the form of the current COE edTPA requirement, formerly known as the Teacher Performance Assessment, which is a performance-based approach to assessing new teachers.

Additionally, because of the extended time commitment of pre-service teachers in this program, we propose that a stipend/scholarship be made available to pre-service teacher candidates. This scholarship would be tiered, based on a candidate's performance throughout the program, and include a requirement to teach in Wyoming for a specified time period following graduation from the program.

Summit participants discussed the possibility that these proposed changes to our current system might create barriers to graduation or raise the bar to a point where candidates for the teaching profession might decide to pursue their pre-service training elsewhere to avoid the rigor of this proposed program of preparation. Our hope is that by establishing this level of rigor, the University of Wyoming and the State of Wyoming might attract the best and the highest motivated candidates and, in pursuing this route, might build our reputation for the highest quality teaching professional.

Continue Classroom Mentorship after Employment

The third proposal is to pair newly hired, novice teachers with teams of accomplished mentor teachers to establish a successful career. It would be ideal if the mentorship provided during the apprenticeship program continued once teaching candidates were employed within a school district. This intense mentoring process would continue until novice teachers demonstrate accomplished teaching. Mentor teacher(s) would recommend professional development tailored to the needs of the novice.

Teacher as Learner

Base Teacher Evaluation on Multiple Measures

The fourth proposal is to base the evaluation of teachers on multiple measures to make a more accurate assessment of their teaching effectiveness. Summit participants agreed that these measures should include video-analysis of teacher work, feedback from students pertaining to instruction, feedback from building administrator(s), and finally, results of students' standardized growth testing.

Video-Analysis of Classroom Practice

The ongoing use of video recording and analysis can be a powerful tool for reflection and improvement of a teacher's practice, as well as evaluation of classroom practices and effectiveness. As a component of a teacher's formal evaluation, a teacher and administrator would agree on the lesson(s) to video record, followed by analysis and discussion of such elements as the quality of the lesson, methodologies, instructional delivery, and student engagement.

Student Feedback Pertaining to Instructional Methodology

Students can provide valuable information to teachers about their instruction. Teachers should obtain regular and ongoing feedback from students based on criteria developed by teachers, parents, and administrators.

Feedback from Building Administrator(s)

The building administrator plays a vital role in the teacher evaluation process. In addition to making employment decisions, the administrator can provide the teacher with valuable feedback for improvement and growth. Summit participants agreed that evaluations of this nature are most effective when they are rigorous, comprehensive, and performed with consideration to the professional development received and implemented by a teacher.

Results of Students' Standardized Growth Testing

Students' standardized growth testing, such as NWEA assessments, showing both pre and post test data in areas impacted by a teacher's instructional focus should be included as a measure of teacher evaluation and can provide valuable information to enhance teacher growth. However, tying PAWS, Wyoming's state proficiency assessment, to teacher performance is, in practice, complex. Because it is difficult to use PAWS from year to year as a measure of student growth attributable to a particular teacher, Summit participants felt it should not be used as part of teacher evaluation.

Individualize Professional Development

The fifth proposal is that professional development should be driven by a multi-faceted evaluation process. Through the evaluation process, a teacher's strengths and weaknesses are identified. A plan should be made involving the teacher, administrator, peers, and instructional facilitators to address these identified needs. The Summit participants strongly agreed that professional development should not solely be focused on top-down district initiatives. It needs to be a balance of both school/district needs and individual needs. Professional development should assist all teachers in their specific growth areas and develop a culture of collaboration at the school level. Peer-to-peer coaching, observation, and collaborative action research could be important parts of this culture.

Allowing the evaluation process to generate needs for staff development provides an ongoing cycle for teacher improvement. It needs to be noted that all teachers, even accomplished master teachers, should be considered to be "In Need of Improvement." The art of teaching is never "finished." Furthermore, all professional development activities should be regularly evaluated for their effectiveness. If an activity is deemed ineffective, it should be improved or abandoned. Summit participants agree that teachers should be included on any team conducting these evaluations.

Organizational Structure's Effect on Student Learning

Retain Local Control

The sixth proposal is to maintain localized control over the interpretation of Wyoming's class size rules in order to consider special needs, poverty levels, and other factors that affect student learning. Although research is mixed on the effect of smaller class size in our classrooms, Summit participants consider Wyoming students fortunate to be the beneficiaries of legislation that recognizes the individual attention a teacher can give to young students when class sizes are smaller. However, Wyoming is a state of population extremes. Our school districts serve populations as large as 13,370 students and as small as 90 students.¹ These diverse populations have different strengths and opportunities for growth. Summit participants believe that school districts and individual schools have the ability to best structure their class sizes, as well as daily

¹ Wyoming Department of Education. 2011-12 Fall Enrollment Ranked By Districts Total, Retrieved October 2012. <https://fusion.edu.wyoming.gov/Login/web/Pages/Stat2Reports/FallEnrollmentDistrictGraphBySize.aspx>

and weekly schedules, to best meet the needs of students in each community.

Group Students According to Ability

The seventh proposal is to, when appropriate, group students based on their ability, regardless of chronologic age. Teachers and teams of teachers, with administrative support, should consider models of ability-based grouping of students to maximize learning. In every activity during the Summit, students and student learning were the focal points of discussion. Participants overwhelmingly agreed that student-centered education systems are best structured to meet individual student's learning needs and that ability-based grouping allows for the greatest flexibility in meeting those needs.

Summit participants recognize that accomplishing ability-based grouping would require a significant shift from the current 'top-down' model that is primarily based on the needs of teachers and administrators (such as scheduling and physical spaces), as opposed to the needs of students. The transition would require a modification of the current framework in which students are grouped according to age/grade level. This would necessitate a high level of coordination and engagement of teachers with multiple levels of evaluation to ensure students are in the right learning environment.

Allow Students to Explore Their Interests

The eighth proposal is to build "student passion time" into the schedule as an opportunity for students to pursue their interests while developing 21st century skills. As discussed at the Summit, some companies, such as Google, allow employees to explore their passions for 20% of the work time. Teachers at the Summit were intrigued by the idea of allowing our students '20% time' to explore their own interests and develop their own passions. This would not be free or unstructured time, rather a model of how school systems can adjust to meet the evolving demands of today's graduates.

The education community agrees that critical thinking is an essential skill. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills emphasizes the need for students to obtain skills in critical thinking/problem solving, communication, collaboration and creativity/innovation in order to "master the multi-dimensional abilities required of them in the 21st century."² Although the importance of developing these skills is known, it is not emphasized, in part, because Wyoming's current testing model does not measure students' abilities within these categories. In fact, the current trend is to move toward higher accountability for students and teachers based on the standardized tests that do not measure these valued skills. As a result, teachers are not encouraged to dedicate time to helping students grow their learning and innovation skills; rather the focus of their time is devoted to the tested subject areas. Students could make gains in learning by exploring a variety of problems, issues, and ideas through this '20% time'. Teachers at the Summit believed that the skills in reading, language, writing, and math would increase given unique and student-driven opportunities to explore their world.

² <http://www.p21.org>

Minimize Classroom Time Lost to Standardized Testing

The ninth proposal is to minimize the amount of instructional time lost to standardized testing. Summit participants understand the importance of testing and measuring student growth, but are cautious about the time it takes away from direct student instruction. Some teachers at the Summit reported that large amounts of classroom time were used for standardized testing. As accountability measures mount, Summit participants hope that instructional time will be the highest priority. It is imperative that the testing industry finds ways to gather performance data on students in ways that may not be the most cost effective but are student-friendly and easy to administer in a reasonable amount of time.

Foster Teacher Leadership

The final proposal is that schools and districts work to foster an environment in which teachers are encouraged to assume informal and formal leadership positions. Summit participants noted throughout the discussions that teacher leadership overlapped most, if not all, of the other proposals. Teaching is considered a ‘flat profession’. Unless a teacher assumes additional roles or leadership positions, a teacher’s job description and level of responsibility is the same on the very first day of his career as it is on the final day before retirement. Some teachers would like to increase or change their responsibilities throughout their career in order to continue feeling fulfilled, challenged, and valuable.

Teachers at the Summit discussed their own experiences with leadership opportunities. Teachers from smaller schools and districts said they often felt overwhelmed, as there are not as many people to take on these positions, so a few people end up doing more than they would like. Teachers in larger schools and districts said it was difficult to take on formal leadership positions while continuing to teach in the classrooms; the size of these districts pushes teachers to take leadership opportunities as full-time positions and leave the classroom.

Summit participants agreed that recognizing the expertise of teachers within our own systems could increase teacher morale by valuing the knowledge and experience they possess. Teachers who have demonstrated excellence can be utilized as resources in a school when the administrative environment encourages, accepts, and fully supports teachers in leadership roles. Some teachers would like to provide leadership but do not want to leave the classroom. As district and building administrators work to create avenues for teachers to pursue leadership, it is important to structure the environment to take this into account and may require such things as creating alternate schedules. Furthermore, teachers need to receive training in leading other adults, as working with colleagues is very different from working with students.

Wyoming Education Summit Participants September 14-15, 2012

Panelists

National Panel:

Dr. Ron Thorpe - President and CEO, National Board of Professional Teaching Standards
Dr. Kareen Borders - US Department of Education Teacher Ambassador
Lori Nazareno - Center for Teaching Quality, Founder and Lead Teacher of Math-Science Leadership Academy
Steven Baugh - Director, Center for Improvement of Teacher Education and Schooling

State Panel:

Dr. Kay Persichitte - Dean, College of Education, University of Wyoming
Senator Chris Rothfuss - Wyoming State Legislature, Albany County, Select Committee on Statewide Education Accountability
Mary Kay Hill - Deputy Policy Director for Wyoming Governor Matt Mead
Walt Wilcox - Principal, Dean Morgan Middle School, Casper, WY, Wyoming Professional Teaching Standards Board Member

Participating National Board Certified Teachers

Amy Aguierre- Park County School District #6
Jenifer Albrandt- Converse County School District #2
Stephany Anderson- Park County School District #6
Julie Balzan- Platte County School District #1
Teddi Benson- Albany County School District #1
*Katherine Boehnke- Natrona County School District #1
Sandra Bowling- Sweetwater County School District #2
Andrea Carroll- Sweetwater County School District #1
Diane Chamberlain- Albany County School District #1
*Jennifer Christensen- Natrona County School District #1
Heidi Christensen- Converse County School District #1
Gerry Clifton- Platte County School District #1
Cindy Collins- Park County School District #6
Christine Cope- Uinta County School District #1
Dana Curtis- Natrona County School District #1
Teresa Decker- Park County School District #6
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Sharon Duffey- Laramie County School District #2
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Wendy Phillips- Carbon County School District #2
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Cindy Schmid- Laramie County School District #1
Kristen Simkins- Sweetwater County School District #1
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