

3 Ways to Lead Inquiry-Based Schools

By [Peter DeWitt](#) on [June 22, 2020 6:45 AM](#)



Today's guest post is written by Kimberly L. Mitchell, author of Experience Inquiry and instructor at the University of Washington's College of Education.

"Right now, there is an aspiring teacher in a graduate school of education watching a professor babble on and on about engagement ... in the most disengaging way possible." Professor Chris Emdin: **Teach Teachers How To Create Magic**

Over the last 20 years, I've worked with school leaders whose almost singular mission is to change the way their teachers teach. "Their curriculum looks good on paper," they will say. "My teachers can 'talk the talk,' ... but I still see too much direct instruction and compliant, not curious, students."

Engaged, rigorous, relevant, inquiry-based classrooms. We all want these, right? It's common sense! But turning "common sense" into "common practice" takes more than rhetoric. Leading for

inquiry, simply put, is "walking the talk" with and for teachers. It requires us, as school leaders and coaches, to model it whenever and wherever we can. It requires us to get out of our own comfort zones and change the way we ourselves do business. It's time to look in the mirror. Are we "talking the talk"? What might it look like if we demonstrate inquiry dispositions and strategies in our staff meetings, professional development, and teacher support?

Using the "**inquiry five**" model, here are three ideas to consider:

#1. Model It in Meetings

Get Personal

Nurturing true inquiry requires building emotional bonds with and between staff. Start off meetings by getting teachers talking with one another (especially those from different departments and grade levels): What was one of your highs and lows from the day? What are your plans for the weekend? Who is a student who intrigues you? Try out some new conversation structures like **Impromptu Networking**; experiment with the kinds of questions you ask, rotations and timings. Allow people into your own life a little, too. Share your stories, passions, frustrations, and inner thoughts with your staff. Demonstrate some vulnerability.

Abolish Announcements

Rethink the purpose of a staff meeting (i.e., supporting teacher growth and community vs. sharing out information) just as you are hoping teachers rethink the purpose of a lesson (supporting student growth and community vs. sharing out information). Sure, you may have people grouching that they "must" make an announcement. Hold steady. Tell them to put it in an email or write it on an announcement board. If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it is that when we bring people together, physically or virtually, it had better be worth it for everyone. In the words of Seth Godin: "Meetings and real-time engagements that are worthy of conversations are rare and magical. Use them wisely."

Mix It Up

The most efficient way of getting ideas across might be standing up in front of people and telling them. But teaching isn't telling. If you want teachers to get students curious and stay engaged, then show them what this looks like during your meetings and PD sessions. Demonstrate some risk-taking by mixing up your own teaching repertoire. Explore **EduProtocols** or **Liberating Structures**, visit and try out a couple of the Cult of Pedagogy's **Discussion Strategies**, and if you're feeling extra ambitious, maybe sprinkle in some of Viola Spolin's **Theater Games for the Classroom**. Show your teachers that you're still learning about the best ways to fully engage them as learners.

#2. Ask Teachers What They Are Truly Curious About

Teachers (like students) are typically told rather than asked what they are authentically curious about. We impose frameworks and rubrics upon them much like we impose standards and curriculum on our students. Not only can it be demotivating, it takes away our agency and slowly distances us from our own questions. Ask teachers what they really want to know (many will be unable to answer immediately, so give this some marination time). When you do hear back, find creative ways to help them interrogate and seek answers.

- How you might support teachers who ask questions like:
- How are the discussions really going in my small-group breakouts?
- What is Marisol doing when I'm not looking?
- Am I talking too much?
- How do I get students to ask deeper questions?
- Are my students really reading and integrating feedback on papers?
- Which students am I calling on the most / least?
- How can I engage students in "boring" topics?
- What are teachers in other countries doing with larger class sizes?
- Am I waiting long enough before calling on students?

Once you have a sense of your teachers' authentic inquiries, see how you can support them. This might involve spending some time in their classrooms to **collect data**, releasing them to **visit each other's classrooms**, sending them relevant video clips or articles, and most crucially, carving out dedicated time for them to pursue their own inquiries further (think **Genius Hour** for teachers).

#3. Give Teachers What They Want

Time

There are few professions where people have so much responsibility and, at the same time, so little authority, especially when it comes to how they structure their time. Without question, teachers need more time to plan, collaborate, and assess.

In inquiry classrooms, students are offered more time to process information and seek new information based on their own curiosities. Why can't we offer this same thing for our teachers? For the love of children, let's not only hold time for teachers to actually accomplish their work but give them time to go even deeper with their own questions.

If you can, avoid holding meetings at the end of the school day. People are wiped out and still processing the day. Offer an hour or two where you take over the classroom so that the teacher can attend to other issues. Instead of a structured meeting, workshop, or PLC, consider periodic gifts of time like: "I'd like you to choose how to make the best use of this time. Please feel free to meet with another teacher, plan on your own, take a walk, or give feedback on student work. Come back in an hour and let's share."

Autonomy

There are many ways to give teachers more autonomy even when there may be strict standards, curriculum, and assessments in place. Allow teachers to select materials that represent the identities in their classrooms. Ask them which workshops they want to attend and what kinds of coaches they would like to invite in. Celebrate teachers' unique (effective) teaching styles and personality quirks. Suggest that teachers design and administer student surveys so that student voices are heard and integrated into the fabric of the school. Give teachers a voice and, as much as is allowed, offer them the chance to give input over hiring, funding, and professional-development decisions. If you cannot trust your teachers to make their own PD decisions, why are you trusting them with students every day?

Recognition

Irreplaceable Teachers suggest that one of the simplest and most effective ways to keep teachers invested in their work and the school community is to recognize their efforts. Thank someone for something specific you saw them do (like a positive phone call home for students). Surprise teachers with little things like flowers in the staff bathroom, coffee deliveries, a quote about them from a student or parent, an invitation to take a walk together during lunch. Frequently stop by classrooms and ask your best teachers how they are doing and what it would take to keep them at the school.

Want to see better teaching practices? Be clear about what you're looking for and then show them what it looks like. Be honest about how hard it is to change. Don't just coach from the sidelines; join your teachers in "walking the walk."

How well do you "lead for inquiry"? Take this **Inquiry Self-Survey** and replace "students" with "teachers."