

A photograph of a modern office desk. On the left, an Apple iMac monitor displays a desktop with various application icons. In front of it, a silver laptop is open, also showing a desktop with icons. To the right of the laptop is a white mouse. A small potted plant sits on the desk between the monitor and the laptop. In the foreground on the right, the back of a black office chair with a chrome frame is visible. On the wall behind the desk, two framed abstract art pieces are hanging. The overall scene is brightly lit, suggesting a clean, professional workspace.

WORKING VACATION

Educators use summer break
as a time for learning

Glenn Cook

Allison Mackley describes herself as a “professional learner,” whether she’s working in the library at Pennsylvania’s Hershey High School or presenting on a topic at the district, state, or national level.

“I live life to learn professionally,” says Mackley, a National Board Certified Teacher Librarian and instructional technology coach. “All I do in life is part of that.”

Since the school year ended, Mackley has become president of the Pennsylvania School Librarians Association, attended the American Library Association’s annual conference in New Orleans, provided six hours of professional development to staff in her district, and worked with another instructional technology coach to plan a train-the-trainer conference in Hershey this fall.

So much for summer break.

“I’m always working on providing professional development for other people, and preparing those presentations is where a large part of my professional development comes from,” she says. “While we are doing things throughout the year, the summer is often the best opportunity to really work on my learning in a concentrated manner.”

Despite what naysayers believe, the idea that summer is just a two-month vacation for educators could not be farther from the truth. While some take on second jobs to make ends meet, others dive into learning more about their profession so they can come back stronger in the fall.

“The great thing about summer is that you can breathe, take a step back from your practice, and think about what your kids need you to be able to do,” says Elizabeth City, senior lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. “You have some room to focus on your own learning. That can be very challenging to do in the thick of the school year, which is why it’s so important to do during the summer.”

PD ABOUNDS

As demands increase to improve teaching and learning for students, school boards have seen greater calls for ongoing, systemic professional development. And the opportunities for this type of learning for staff also have increased even as budgets have lagged.

Throughout the summer months, professional development opportunities abound, whether they are held in local districts, at the state and regional levels, or at universities like Harvard. Nonprofit and for-profit groups, such as the Learning Policy Institute and Discovery Education, also offer a variety of summer learning opportunities.

“Sometimes, people will say, ‘How come you get to do that?’ and a lot of times my response is, ‘Because I asked,’” Mackley says. “There’s really no trick to it. It’s a matter of sitting down with your administrators and explaining the value you can bring to your district and to your profession. You have to have administrators who have an open mind and trust that you will do that, but it can be done.”

City, head of the education leadership doctoral program at Harvard, has worked as a teacher, building-level administrator, literacy coach, and change coach for Boston Public Schools. She helped start an induction program for new superintendents in Massachusetts and has developed an online professional certificate for educators.

“We are doing a variety of kinds of professional development, from long, sustained engagements to ones that are much shorter, face-to-face in person or online,” she says. “And we know a lot more today about how learning works than we did when I was trained as a teacher more than 20 years ago. We have a lot more tools at our disposal.”

The key, City says, is understanding that professional learning “doesn’t change practice by itself.”

“We have to acknowledge that a lot of professional learning isn’t effective unless it’s part of a coherent, ongoing learning that you’re also doing in your own setting. Bringing ideas in from the outside can be energizing. Exposing others to a knowledge base is important. But you have to have a way to integrate what you learn back into your own practice.”

TIME TO REFLECT

Monique Lamar could not agree more. The principal at Calverton Elementary in Beltsville, Maryland, since 2010, her pre-k through fifth-grade school serves 860 students, 98 percent of whom are Hispanic.

“We have to connect the dots between our students, our staff, our parents, and our community, and it all starts with our leadership team,” Lamar says.

During the summer, Lamar takes her leadership team on a retreat to “allow us to think in a strategic way.” The team picks at least one book to read together, then discusses how they can use the lessons they learn “in a way that maximizes people’s strengths and builds the capacity of our staff.”

“The retreat really sets the pace for the entire year,” she says. “It gives us a chance to recharge our batteries and think about why we’re here in the first place, which is to educate children.”

In her eight years as an administrator, Lamar has attended and presented at a variety of national conferences

and has become a certified mentor to first- and second-year principals. Gradually, she's become more interested in how research and data can be used to improve student results.

"You've got to have time to reflect," she says. "By the end of the year, we've got most of our statewide data. We've done our needs assessment for the next year and our exit interviews. The key is taking the time in a concentrated way to make sense of the previous year and really think about what our staff needs, where the areas of growth are."

For Rob Lundien, a school counselor at Park Hill South High School outside Kansas City, Missouri, the summer break is an opportunity to "focus on developing myself professionally and becoming better at my craft." Already this summer, he has taken a week-long bus tour of colleges and universities with the National Association for College Admissions Counseling, and spent time in Jefferson City working with the Missouri Department of Education on a weeklong boot camp for new counselors.

"This type of work invigorates me. It gets me excited," he says. "The summer means I don't have to worry as much about my students' mental health, or their college and career opportunities that I do daily when I'm working in the heat of the moment. Doing things like this, working at the state level or at the national level, excites me and gets the fire going again, because I know when I go back to my school I can apply some of the knowledge and skills I've learned."

NATIONAL LEVEL

During a three-week period between late June and mid-July, no fewer than seven national associations with education ties hold their annual conferences. The meetings, much like the annual NSBA conference held in March or April, bring principals, teachers, school counselors, communications officials, parent leaders, and technology staff together for several days of sessions, training, and networking.

These types of meetings can be critical to staff members whose departments are small and isolated in the greater district ecosystem. One such example is school communications, where the entire department — if one exists — is typically only one to three people.

"I have a two-person staff, but many districts within the state of Oregon have people who are one-person shops," says Athena Vadnais, director of communications and community engagement for the 11,700-student Gresham-Barlow School District. "The tools you receive at a state or national seminar are really the only places where you can

get job-specific ideas that you can use right away."

Vadnais belongs to state and national organizations that focus on public relations practices, but says working with colleagues who are in her specific field is "invaluable."

"We're definitely a family that wants to see each other succeed, because we want to see schools succeed, and so we've cultivated a culture of sharing with each other at the state and national level," she says. "It's a very supportive environment."

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—Rob Lundien,
school counselor,
Park Hill South High School

Lundien, who has worked with a variety of organizations since being named a finalist for the National School Counselor of the Year in 2016, faced a conflict due to the tight scheduling this summer. The American School Counselor Association's conference was at the same time as a National Education Association professional development session on special education for teachers.

"Last year the two meetings didn't conflict, but they're both at the same time, so I had to choose," says Lundien, who went to the NEA meeting. "It's tough, but I feel fortunate that I've been able to collaborate with educators from other parts of the country. It helps you to realize you have a commonality with others, and you get an opportunity to learn from your peers. For me, that's the best way to learn. I really thrive on the collaboration."

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