

Chairing the Subject Area Committee

The beginning of a new school year usually includes the start-up process for a new Subject Area Committee (SAC), which has been assigned the task of producing a focused, aligned curriculum. Oftentimes, we at CLI are asked by the Curriculum Coordinator, or other persons who will chair these committees, if we have any advice that will help make things go smoothly. Here are some helpful hints a chairperson should consider.

1. Find a suitable meeting space. Arrange seating in a “U” or square so participants can see one another during discussions. There needs to be enough table space so that SAC members can lay out all their work materials: training notebooks, writing tablets, state standards documents, etc. Keep in mind that teachers, who are not accustomed to sitting for long periods of time, will be doing just that — so commandeer the most comfortable chairs you can. Assure the meeting room has good lighting and ventilation. Then reserve the room for each meeting date for the school year.
2. Think ahead about the supplies you will need, procure them, and find a suitable storage place in or near the meeting room. These include such things as butcher paper, colored paper, markers, easel tablets, tape, scissors, and writing paper, as well as any work materials mentioned above (training notebooks, standards documents) that you might need to order for the SAC members.
3. Since most SAC meetings last a full day, refreshments are always appreciated. If you don’t have a budget to support purchase of refreshments, suggest at the first meeting that SAC members sign up to bring refreshments throughout the year. (If nothing else, at least provide a pitcher or two of ice water.)
4. A couple of days (minimum) or as much as a week before each meeting, send out a reminder of date/time/place, and include an agenda, as well as a note about anything SAC members should bring with them.
5. At the first meeting, unless you're a small district where everyone already knows each other, start with introductions. Then, regardless of district size and acquaintance, have SAC members report what grade levels or courses they “represent.” This tells us who will be preparing which parts of the curriculum, as well as who the communication link is for teachers of each grade level or course among the rest of the staff.

6. The first meeting is also the best time to establish “rules” for all subsequent meetings. Here are some suggestions:
 - A) Meetings will start and end on time; show consideration for other committee members by being punctual.
 - B) Decisions will be by consensus.
 - C) If the discussion triggers a thought you don’t want to forget, but don’t want to present now... jot it down. Eliminate sidebar conversations! Otherwise, (1) you will miss hearing something important from the general discussion because you’re talking to your neighbor; (2) your sidebar conversation makes it difficult for others to hear the main discussion; and (3) if what you have to say is important enough to say now, then everyone should hear it!
7. Also at the first meeting, be sure everyone knows “the charge” — what exactly the committee is expected to accomplish this year. Present an overview of the process to be followed. Create a yearly calendar and timeline. Be sure everyone gets the dates of all meetings noted in their personal calendars.
8. Act as facilitator during discussions. If a few people are dominating the conversation, point out that we need to hear all points of view, and ask specific others what they think. When discussion starts to stray from the topic at hand, draw attention to the timeline, to pull the group back and stay on task.
9. During discussions, if a question comes up that can’t be answered now, or if a topic is one that “we’ll get to later,” write the item on a sheet of chart paper that is displayed in a prominent place. This keeps the group from forgetting about these items. When the question is finally answered, or the topic is now addressed, cross off the item on the chart.
10. Save some “wrap-up” time for the conclusion of each meeting. Clarify what happened that day, and record all decisions made, assuring that all SAC members agree with them. Set the agenda for the next meeting. How much time is needed for wrap-up depends on the day’s agenda. When you’re halfway through the day, make a decision about how much time to allow and thus what time you need to start the end-of-day discussions. Too often we’re so busy that “quitting time” sneaks up on us, so this step gets rushed or eliminated completely. *The wrap-up is too important a part of the process not to be adequately addressed.*

These kinds of organization strategies make meetings run more efficiently and as a consequence, committee members are more productive. When district personnel ask us how long it should take to get through the curriculum development process, the answer depends on how well the meetings are conducted. Efficient, productive meetings can save the district *hours* — often equivalent to a full day or more — of work time.