Read From the Menu

Give teachers choices when asking them to read a book over summer break

By Todd Schmidt

We've all been there as educators. We get to the end of the year, only to be given one last "gift" from our principal—a book to read over the summer. Sometimes, if we're lucky, we have at least been given some input on the selection, but far too often, it is a book that we aren't all that thrilled about and most likely would never have chosen.

To be honest, I have done this myself as a site leader. I thought I'd picked some really good titles, too. I thought my choices were inspirational or thought-provoking, and while many of my teachers at least made the effort to skim the book prior to school starting, it rarely had the impact in the classroom that I hoped it would have.

In a time when we increasingly see the rallying cry for enhancing options for student voice and choice (especially in the area of reading), wouldn't it be fantastic if we did the same thing for our teachers and staff?

Personal Tastes

Enter "Staff Book Tastings." Inspired by Rich Czyz of *4 O'clock Faculty* fame, it looked like just the thing I was searching for. A friend and colleague, Christy Flores, showed me how she had implemented it at her school, and the excitement and happiness on her teachers' faces was all the motivation I needed to try it out.

My first step was to collate a list of books. I wanted to focus on three main topics: (1) innovation and creativity in the classroom; (2) inspiration and motivation; and (3) literacy. I scoured my bookshelves for a few favorites and asked my PLN what they were reading and recommending.

Realizing I might overwhelm the staff with too many choices, I narrowed the list to 25 titles. I secured funding from the PTA and some extra money I had set aside for PD and book purchases.

Going with a restaurant theme, I divvied up the books into different "courses." I then made a "menu" that included the book cover, an Amazon review, and a notes section. Now, armed with the books and the menu, I determined how to present this to the staff.

Setting the Table

In *The Wild Card,* authors Hope and Wade King discuss the importance and value of setting a scene in classrooms to make lessons more of an experience. What if we did something like that for staff meetings? Armed with ideas from my PLN, I set up our science lab as a restaurant. Each table had books from each section of the menu. My office manager decorated the tables with plants and table tents listing a specific "course." We got plastic champagne flutes, baked goods, and sparkling apple cider.

I welcomed teachers at the door and explained the process. Using the menu as a guide, they could go to different tables and try out a few of the books. They could take notes if they felt like it, but the goal at the end was for them to choose one book to read for the summer. I set up a Google form for them to fill out once they had made a choice.

Photography by Todd Schmidt

Our teachers appreciated the opportunity to steer their own professional development.

Second Helpings

I had such a great time setting this up and enjoyed seeing my teachers get into the process. Several asked if they could take *two* books (or even three). I had purchased three copies of each book, so I had plenty to go around, but if a fourth person wanted the same book, I offered to order it for them or send a digital version.

Even teachers don't always enjoy homework when they're off the clock. But by introducing a menu of options for their summer reading and picking titles to suit every taste, I made the assignment less of a burden. Our teachers appreciated the opportunity to steer their own professional development, and will return to school in the fall with the new knowledge that these books provide. P

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Adding to the List

Next year, I'll add to the summer reading program by doing the following:

1. Setting up a staff library with the books offered. I plan to restock the titles that were selected, so that folks can recommend them to a colleague.
2. Creating a Flipgrid where staff can share a 60-second talk on the book they read, including one or two things gleaned from the book that they plan to implement in the new school year.
3. Reaching out to the author via Twitter and sharing a #BookSnap of a teacher's favorite segment or quote.