

Maximizing the Impact of Teacher Collaboration

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One hallmark of many high-performing schools is the success its teachers have had in creating what is known as a professional learning community. Richard DuFour (2004) characterizes professional learning communities as groups of educators who “work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice...engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning” (p. 9).

How are professional learning communities created? The answer is complex since these communities take many forms and evolve over time. One characteristic that all thriving professional learning communities have in common, however, is collaboration. Research shows that collaboration between teachers can be a powerful tool for professional development and a driver for school improvement by providing “opportunities for adults across a school system to learn and think together about how to improve their practice in ways that lead to improved student achievement” (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2004, p. 2).

Recognizing the value of this activity, many schools have adapted their schedules to ensure that teachers and other professionals have time to collaborate through team meetings; critical friends groups; lesson study, in which teachers collaboratively plan, observe, and analyze classroom lessons; or other professional development. A nationwide survey of more than 5,000 teachers found that 69 percent of these teachers participated in “regularly scheduled collaboration with other teachers” and 53 percent participated in a common planning period with other members of their team (Parsad, Lewis, & Farris, 2001, p. iv).

Unfortunately, school staff members sometimes find that although accommodating schedules are in place, true collaboration is more difficult than they had anticipated. Some find that the time set aside is not used productively or is not having the hoped-for impact on teaching and learning. As a result, they can become frustrated and begin seeing team meetings or common planning time as one more obligation that keeps them from doing their “real” work. This month’s newsletter addresses that issue by posing five questions that teachers can use to keep their collaboration on track so that it contributes to the growth of a professional learning community in their school.

1. Are the Conditions Right for Us to Collaborate Successfully?

Although establishing a regular time and space to meet is important, other conditions are required for individuals to work effectively as a group—and the potential roadblocks are plentiful. One roadblock relates to teacher perceptions. Some teachers prefer working alone; they might feel mistrustful of other staff members, want to protect their “territory,” or resist what they perceive as interference from outsiders (DuFour & Burnette, 2002). Although collaboration can thrive in a climate of continuous, positive, and respectful critical inquiry, some teachers mistake critical for criticism and fear that others will point out their instructional shortcomings.

A second roadblock relates to a lack of focus. Time for collaboration can be hijacked by personal conversations or by a mandate, project, or crisis that suddenly has appeared on the horizon. Negotiating these distractions can quickly consume meeting time. As authors DuFour and Burnette (2002) note, this lack of meeting focus can derail efforts to develop a learning community.

A third roadblock is that groups generally often underestimate the task of developing collaboration skills (National Staff Development Council, 2001a).

In recognition of these common problems, a good beginning step for collaborative groups is establishing standard operating procedures and written group norms. Another strategy for keeping the group focused on best practice is the use of discussion protocols. (See “Text-Based Discussion Protocol” [Insert](#).) A discussion protocol is a tool for structuring conversations that specifies how talk time will be allotted to achieve specific aims, such as answering focus questions, presenting context, formulating clarifying or probing questions, or listening to and reflecting on feedback (The Collaborative, n.d.).

Although teachers might feel awkward using these tools at first, the benefits are substantial. Such tools formalize both the processes and the expectations of collaborative groups. They establish ground rules for participant interaction and can even accommodate potential distractions by allotting time for participants to voice concerns. They also help reassure participants that the investment of time will be worthwhile.

2. Are Our Efforts Aligned With School and District Priorities?

Researchers Leo and Cowan (2000) and Hord (1997) identify shared vision and values focused on student learning as one of five dimensions characterizing professional learning communities. In other words, the most effectively used collaborative meeting time focuses on issues that are directly connected to the improvement priorities of the school or district. For example, if a school goal is to improve student problem-solving skills, collaboration time may be spent examining lessons and identifying problem-solving activities across various subject areas and grade levels.

School and district goals for student achievement should drive the work of professional learning communities. School leaders should focus the work of collaborative groups by helping them align their priorities with achievement goals as well as provide the resources needed to support their work. These priorities also should act as a filter for identifying additional professional development (Annenberg Institute

for School Reform, 2004). Research indicates that teachers participating in professional development linked to school activities are more likely to report that their participation improved their teaching (Parsad et al., 2001).

3. Are We Focused on Improving Student Learning?

Effective professional collaboration in schools focuses on improving practice in order to improve student learning. Teachers report that use of “one of several group processes available for the study of student work” promotes “ensuing discussions of the assignment, the link between the work and content standards, their expectations for student learning, and the use of scoring rubrics,” leading to improved teaching and student learning (National Staff Development Council, 2001b).

In contrast, researcher Kim Yap (2005) finds that teachers in low-performing schools are less likely to focus on instruction during their collaborative meetings:

While teachers at the low-performing schools are likely to take part in collaborative activities (e.g., joint planning and team building), there has been some hesitancy to identify instruction as a key area of school improvement. They are more comfortable talking about organizational structures, schedules, and other factors outside of what they do in the classroom. (p. 12)

Author Daniel Duke (2006) cites one example of a school that used roundtable discussions as a collaborative process that participants felt was highly productive. He notes that student information was shared before the roundtables met so that the entire 45-minute meeting could be devoted to discussing how to make immediate instructional adjustments and provide more monitoring and support for individual students. Before these meetings concluded, individuals were assigned responsibility for implementing the agreed-upon interventions and reporting back at the next roundtable on how well those interventions had worked.

4. Do We Use Data to Inform Our Work?

The use of data provides an additional structure for keeping the focus of collaborative groups on improved teaching and learning. Accurate and relevant data can help identify areas of concern, inform discussion, provide evidence of student learning, and aid the development of strategies and solutions. Data use circumvents the common pitfalls of school improvement efforts, such as focusing on activities instead of results (DuFour & Burnette, 2002) or making and working from assumptions instead of evidence. Again, established norms and the use of structured protocols can help teachers overcome their fear that data will be used to criticize or evaluate their instruction.

Many excellent products, guidelines, and tools for identifying, interpreting, and analyzing data are available for collaborative groups to use. (See the references and the additional resource.) If more help is needed, members might also request professional development on how to ask good questions of data or

how to access available data systems.

5. Do We Share What We Learn?

Sharing is a critical component of learning communities (Hord, 1997; Leo & Cowan, 2000; Morrissey, 2000). A truly productive collaboration leads not only to individual reflection on instructional practice but also to conversation among collaborators about what they have learned. Also, it is a sign that teachers have moved to deprivatize their practices and accept their own vulnerability as learners as well as teachers.

Despite its value, the ability and willingness to share insights about one's own classroom practice takes time to develop and requires a high degree of trust and professional respect. "Shared personal practice is often the last dimension to be developed. It is relatively uncommon for school staff to share their classroom practice with their peers in a formalized setting with the intent to improve and change [it]," say authors Leo & Cowan (2000, p. 13). As professionals develop a greater ease with sharing, it can grow from contributing insights during a book study or reporting on a classroom action research project to peer observation, consultation, or even peer instructional coaching.

Conclusion

Structured professional collaboration that focuses on improved instruction benefits both teachers and students. School staff members who aspire to grow through professional learning communities can start by learning how to more effectively use the opportunities they have to work together.

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Additional Resource for Data-Driven Decision Making

The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement. (2006). Data-driven decision making. Retrieved March 22, 2007, from http://www.centerforcsri.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=85&Itemid=77

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