COLLABORATIVE TEAMS
IN A
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

What does the term “collaborative team” mean?

A number of important cultural shifts must occur if schools (or districts) are to successfully move from a more traditional culture to one that is reflective of a professional learning community. The most basic of these is a shift from a culture of teacher isolation that characterizes many schools, to a collaborative culture where teachers work together as part of a collaborative team.

In a professional learning community teachers are contributing members of a team that is working interdependently to achieve common goals and to improve their professional practice and student learning. There are some key words in the previous sentence that provide an intellectual framework for thinking about collaborative teams in schools that function as true professional learning communities; words such as “contributing”, “interdependently”, “common”, “improve” and “learning”. Unless attention is paid to each of these key words, we won’t have collaborative teams in the White River District. We’ll simply have groups of teachers who are already stressed and overworked doing even more “busy work” and seeing it as just that…busy work.

In a professional learning community, the focus is not simply on whether we have organized our schools into high-performing teams, but rather what do the teams do? Michael Fullen, an international authority on educational reform, has correctly pointed out “collaborative cultures, which by definition have close relationships, are indeed powerful, but unless they are focusing on the right things they may end up being powerfully wrong.”

So, what should be the focus of a teams’ work? In a professional learning community, teams focus on the major questions and issues that have the greatest impact on student learning. For example, they are constantly clarifying the essential outcomes – in Washington State it is our GLE’s - which students are expected to learn in every subject, grade or course, and they are constantly improving the alignment with state and district curriculum standards. These teams dedicate time to plan together using the GLE’s as their guide. They set curriculum and learning priorities and collaborate about the pacing of the curriculum - essentially creating a learning roadmap.
One of the first things high-performing teams do is collaboratively write explicit “norms” to effectively guide their work as a collaborative team. The process of developing these norms or guidelines helps clarify expectations, expected behaviors and how the team will function. Norms also help team members be accountable. How we behave is really the only thing we have control over.

We can also expect there will be that time when someone will fail to honor the norms that have been agreed upon. As Kegan and Lahey put it, referring back to the norms can help the “members of the group to 're-member' what the group values and stands for - working as one cooperating whole to ensure higher levels of learning for all students.

In addition to focusing on the key questions of learning, collaborative teams are expected to continually engage in collective inquiry as they deal with issues of teaching, learning and improvement. And, teams in professional learning communities engage in action research and experimentation. Teams are constantly experimenting to discover better ways to have more students learning more. This involves, among other things, writing common assessments and collaboratively analyzing the quality of student work (CASL).

Collaborative teams write periodic common formative assessments designed to monitor the learning of sub-groups and individual students on a timely basis. They join together to analyze the results of these assessments and set learning improvement goals, as well as, make the necessary instructional changes to meet the needs of these students. After all, the goal is more students learning at higher levels. The power of common assessments lies in how they are utilized by collaborative teams. The results from timely, curriculum-based, collaboratively developed, common assessments are essential in determining which students have learned each skill. In addition to determining areas of concern the data is also helpful in identifying strengths.

Teams collaboratively analyze the quality of student work and develop rubrics that define the level of proficiency that students should achieve. Some think analyzing student work together takes too much time, but it is only when teachers analyze student learning/work together in an effort to change instructional strategies and design instructional interventions that we can ensure high levels of learning for all students. When working together, teacher teams discover how student learning evolves and how their instructional practices promote learning.

Teams study important issues such as best practices in grading, reporting and, homework and stay focused on the question, “What is the impact on learning?” And, they are constantly seeking ways to provide additional time and support for students who are having difficulty with their learning, as well as publicly celebrating and stretching the performance levels of students who are learning. Most importantly, they accept the collective responsibility for ensuring that their students are learning at high levels. Ask yourself this, “What does taking
collective responsibility for student learning look like at your school? What would it look like if you really meant it?"

In a collaborative team culture the teachers not only provide support for students they also learn from and support each other. Let’s face it, being a teacher can be a very lonely, private, and stressful profession if teachers are left on their own to fend for themselves. In a professional learning community, teams of teachers work together to deal with issues, solve problems, improve instructional practice, making success seem more “doable”. Ultimately, the use of collaborative teams provides teachers with a culture of understanding, support and a standard of care for each other which will go miles toward increased job satisfaction and improving student learning.

In short, collaborative teams of teachers are the heart and soul of a school that functions as a professional learning community. Everything flows from these teams.

**Where does school level leadership fit in collaborative team?**

Unfortunately, the quality of collaborative cultures is not the same in each school. The research is clear on this point; leadership matters. Developing the capacity of collaborative teams is one of the key functions of the principalship. It is unrealistic to expect teams to form, function and address the key issues of teaching and learning without leadership and support from the principal. Principals must take the lead in structuring and organizing collaborative teams, providing training, feedback, clear directions and expectations. They must help teams develop norms and clear standards of quality, interact regularly with the teams, and assess the performance of teams. It is as simple as this; the quality of the work of collaborative teams in schools depends on the quality of leadership and support that is provided by the principals and the district-level administrative team.

**Why is this so important?**

Most twenty-first century organizations look very different from the organizations most of us grew up with and are familiar with. The old hierarchical, top-down organizational structure has given way to a much flatter organization where the emphasis is on the use of high-performing, collaborative teams. Much of this innovation is the result of the work of W. Edwards Deming and the Total Quality Management movement. The impact of collaborative teams has been so pervasive that Peter Senge, major figure in organizational development, has made this observation: “We are at a point in time where teams are recognized as a critical component of every enterprise—the predominant unit for decision-making and getting things done….working in teams is the norm in a learning organization.”
The power of teams is illustrated in this story that appeared in the Journal of Staff Development.

“The New York Times science pages recently told the story of heart surgeons in Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont—only 23 in all—who agreed in 1993 to observe each other regularly in the operating room and share their know-how, insights, and approaches.

In the two years after their nine-month project, the death rate among their patients fell by an astonishing 25 percent. Merely by emphasizing teamwork and communication instead of functioning as solitary craftsmen, the study showed, all doctors brought about major changes in their individual and institutional practices.

For teachers who, like heart surgeons, have traditionally worked as isolated professionals, the experiment holds a powerful lesson.”

It is interesting that despite wave after wave of "reforms" in public education the task of teaching continues, in most schools, to fall upon a single individual teacher standing alone before a group of students working in isolation. Popin & Weeres have written that teachers sense this isolation and report that one of their greatest sources of dissatisfaction is their perception that they scarcely know their colleagues and have little time to discuss issues related to curriculum, instruction and students. The isolation of teachers is one of the most formidable roadblocks to ensuring that students learn at high levels and that teachers feel a sense of community, caring, support and professionalism.

There is absolutely no research to support the proposition that the best way to significantly improve schools is to have teachers working alone, by themselves. Yet, there is overwhelming research to support the use of high-performing, collaborative teams. Creating a collaborative environment has been described by Eastwood and Lewis as the “single most important factor” for successful school improvement initiatives and the “first order of business” for those seeking to improve schools.

However, a word of caution is in order. Some schools mistake the term “collaboration” with “congeniality”. While, obviously, “getting along” is a worthy goal, that is not what the “team concept” is about. Rather, the use of high-performing teams is designed to be a systematic process in which teachers work together, interdependently, to analyze and improve their own professional practices and improve the learning levels of students. The research supporting the practice of arranging personnel into teams has been identified as an important factor linked to school improvement. (Darling-Hammond; Newmann)
An interesting question is this. Are we a profession? In Bob Eaker and Rick and Becky Dufour’s books on professional learning communities, they have written consistently on the need for schools to seek out “best practices”, pointing out that basing what we do on proven practice is a distinguishing characteristic of a profession. With the lack of any credible evidence supporting a culture of teacher isolation and a vast amount of research supporting the use of collaborative teams, how can we as a profession continue to utilize school structures that not only allow but, in many cases, support teacher isolation?

In fact, isn’t it ultimately just a question of common sense? Perhaps Handy put it best when he wrote “People who collaborate learn from each other and create synergy. That is why learning organizations are made up of teams that share a common purpose. Organizations need togetherness to get things done and to encourage the exploration essential to improvement.”

One final thought. Bob Eaker and Rick and Becky Dufour remind us that a collaborative culture does not simply emerge in a school or a district. Leaders cultivate collaborative cultures when they develop the capacity of their staffs to work as members of high-performing teams. People throughout the organization, however, must remember that collaboration is a means to an end – to higher levels of learning – rather than the end itself.

**Where does this fit at White River High School and their goal of functioning as a professional learning community?**

The White River High School English department began the year meeting as one large professional learning community. The information below highlights their journey. As a team their first order of business was to get new staff members on board with curriculum materials. After that was taken care of they jumped into writing SMART goals related to student growth in the area of English/Language Arts.

Their next step was to reevaluate the scope and sequence. They began with ninth grade and worked their way through each of the grades. This process was quite revealing and helped them identify areas where they could be more deliberate in providing building blocks for students that would aid in their success in future years.

The new scope and sequence is the first piece of the new "English Dept. Manual" which is being created by the Department Chairperson and will be a key component of communication between department members.

Mid-way through the scope and sequence they realized that the department had a dire need to develop common language related to writing. They knew that our K-8 students were using "Step Up to Writing" so as a team began with an exploration of that program which included a one day training for several
department members. They invited two teachers from Puyallup High School to share how they use "Step Up" in their high school program. The next step was to send several department members to a Jane Shaffer training that was held in a neighboring district. They then met to discuss what each program had to offer students of varying abilities at WRHS.

They are now meeting in grade level teams with the goal of creating one formative assessment based on our common scope and sequence.

Janel Keating
Director of Student Learning
White River School District