WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Teachers work collaboratively on the routine tasks associated with teaching.

STRONGLY AGREE  AGREE  NO OPINION  DISAGREE  STRONGLY DISAGREE

Teachers focus their professional development on the learning needs of their students.

STRONGLY AGREE  AGREE  NO OPINION  DISAGREE  STRONGLY DISAGREE

Professional development involves teachers working in teams to improve teaching and student learning.

STRONGLY AGREE  AGREE  NO OPINION  DISAGREE  STRONGLY DISAGREE

The majority of teacher professional development occurs at school.

STRONGLY AGREE  AGREE  NO OPINION  DISAGREE  STRONGLY DISAGREE

Teachers meet multiple times per week in teams to learn, reflect, and extend teaching and student learning.

STRONGLY AGREE  AGREE  NO OPINION  DISAGREE  STRONGLY DISAGREE
Decades of practice in professional learning demonstrated little long-term impact on teaching or student learning. Past professional development practices focused on building educators’ expertise through workshops outside schools or conferences that individuals attended and then sometimes informally conveyed information about to colleagues. Practitioners and researchers recently have begun to examine professional learning practices to find common features that show results — long-lasting changes in teacher practices and improved student achievement.

An emerging consensus suggests that professional development that has the highest impact focuses directly on teachers’ instructional content and material, takes place in their own schools and classrooms, includes coaching and ongoing feedback, and seeks to involve all teachers so that the learning is schoolwide rather than developing each individual’s capacity independently (Miles, Odden, Fermanich, & Archibald, 2005, p. 9).

Until the last decade, teachers viewed professional

“For more than two decades, research has shown that teachers who experience frequent, rich learning opportunities have in turn been helped to teach in more ambitious and effective ways. Yet few teachers gain access to such intensive professional learning opportunities. More typically, teachers experience professional development as episodic, superficial, and disconnected from their own teaching interests or recurring problems of practice. This prevailing pattern — a few rich opportunities, many disappointing ones — speaks both to the promise and to the limitations of professional development, as it is typically organized. An important part of this enduring story centers on the schools and districts where teachers work and whether they are positioned well to foster professional learning opportunities that enhance the quality of teaching and learning.”

— Little, 2006, p. 1
development as a matter of personal preference. Districts responded with a menu of workshops. No research has produced evidence that this approach is effective or that it produces changes in teaching behavior or results for students. In too many school systems, however, the catalogue-driven model of professional development still is the only kind of professional learning available. While educators do need opportunities to learn outside the school to meet the needs of those at different career stages and for individual preferences, outside professional development cannot be the only learning educators experience.

The core of effective professional learning is collaboration. As Dennis Sparks, NSDC’s emeritus executive director, said: “If every student is to have a competent teacher, then virtually all their teachers must be learning virtually all the time. While that learning will occasionally happen in workshops and courses, most of it will occur as teachers plan lessons together, examine their students’ work to find ways to improve it, observe one another teach, and plan improvements based on various data. Those of us concerned about teacher expertise must take leadership in designing such a system for learning” (Sparks, 1998, p. 2).

**THE CASE FOR COLLABORATION**

Collaborative professional learning is a form of professional development in which teachers work together to improve teaching and learning. “The term ‘professional learning community’ defines itself,” says Melanie Morrissey (2000). “A school that operates as such engages the entire group of professionals in coming together for learning within a supportive, self-created community. Teacher and administrator learning is more complex, deeper, and more fruitful in a social setting, where the participants can interact, test their ideas, challenge their inferences and interpretations, and process new information with each other” (pp. 3-4).

Collaborative professional learning engages teachers in job-embedded, results-driven, and standards-based learning. NSDC’s Standards for Staff Development (2001) advocate for professional learning that organizes teachers in learning communities whose goals align with those of the school and district. Tool 2.2 includes the rationale for NSDC’s Learning Communities standard. This rationale is a brief synthesis of the research and can help staff members understand the value of collaboration.

Judith Warren Little’s research contributes some of the earliest and most definitive findings about the benefits of teachers learning together. She studied teachers as they worked together and found that regular, authentic, joint work focused on explicit goals for student learning “pays off richly in the form of higher-quality solutions to instructional problems, increased teacher confidence, and, not surprisingly, remarkable gains in student achievement” (Schmoker, 2005, 178).

Collaboration among educators builds shared responsibility and improves student learning. “Schools where teachers focus on student work, interact with colleagues to plan how to improve their teaching, and continuously bring new skills and knowledge to bear on their practice are also schools that produce the best results for students” (National Education Association Foundation for the Improvement of Education, 2000, p. 1).

Fred Newmann and Gary Wehlage (1995) identified common factors in schools that achieved disproportionately higher student performance in math, science, and social studies. These schools had staff members who formed learning communities, focused
their attention on student work and assessment, and changed their instructional practices to improve their results with students. Common goals, consistent messages about learning objectives and methods, and collective responsibility, say Newmann and Wehlage, increase teacher efficacy. In addition, they believe that collaborative activity increases teachers’ technical competence and collective responsibility.

“Collaborative activity can enhance teachers’ technical competence. As teachers work with students from increasingly diverse social backgrounds, and as the curriculum begins to demand more intellectual rigor, teachers require information, technical expertise, and social-emotional support far beyond the resources they can muster as individuals working alone. When teachers collaborate productively, they participate in reflective dialogue to learn more about professional issues; they observe and react to one another’s teaching, curriculum, and assessment practices; and they engage in joint planning and curriculum development. By enriching teachers’ technical and social resources, collaboration can make teaching more effective.

"[C]learly shared purpose and collaboration contribute to collective responsibility: One’s colleagues share responsibility for the quality of all students’ achievement. This norm helps to sustain each teacher’s commitment. A culture of collective responsibility puts more peer pressure and accountability on staff who may not have carried their fair share, but it can also ease the burden on teachers who have worked hard in isolation but who felt unable to help some students. In short, professional community within the teaching staff sharpens the educational focus and enhances the technical and social support that teachers need to be successful” (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995, p. 31).

**ATTRIBUTES OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING**

Collaborative professional learning engages teachers in teams that work together over time to improve teaching and learning. This approach has several attributes that distinguish it from other forms of professional learning.

Shirley Hord and a team of SEDL researchers reviewed the literature on professional communities and studied professional learning communities in 22 schools. As a result of their research, they identified five themes that served as the characteristics of teachers learning together in collaborative teams:

- **Supportive and shared leadership** requires collegial and facilitative participation of the principal, who shares leadership — and thus, power and authority — by inviting staff input and action in decision making.
- **Shared values and vision** include an unwavering commitment to student learning that is consistently articulated and referenced in the staff’s work.
- **Collective learning and application of learning** requires that school staff at all levels are engaged in processes that collectively seek new knowledge among staff and application of the learning to solutions that address students’ needs.
- **Supportive conditions** include physical and human capacities that encourage and sustain a collegial atmosphere and collective learning.
- **Shared practice** involves the review of a teacher’s behavior by colleagues and includes feedback and assistance to support individual and community development.
 These themes describe the practices that prevail in schools in which teachers engage in genuine professional learning teams with colleagues.

**Tool 2.1** can help educators understand the attributes of collaborative professional learning by having them work through an inquiry-based activity. This tool helps educators picture how collaborative professional learning might look in their school. Teams, of course, have the freedom to modify the concept of collaborative professional learning, provided the elements of NSDC’s definition are evident in their work. Without those elements, collaboration will deviate from the research-supported practice and may fail to produce results for either educators or students.

**CREATING COLLABORATION**

Because collaboration is distinctively different from more traditional forms of professional learning such as workshops, courses, and training sessions, schools and districts should recognize that professional learning communities themselves are not the reform initiative, but rather are “the supporting structure for schools to continuously transform themselves though their own internal capacity” (Morrissey, p. 10). Some, however, view creating professional learning communities as their end goal rather than the means to the goal of improving student learning. Distinguishing the difference is essential to understanding the concept of collaborative professional learning.

Many educators have heard the term and even practice some attributes of the concept. Too often, though, their collaboration sessions resemble management or business meetings rather than genuine communities of practice. Developing a common understanding is the first step toward ensuring that collaboration among educators produces results for students.

This resource guide assists schools and teachers in linking professional learning to teachers’ routine work by recognizing that collaborating about curriculum, assessment, instruction, and student learning is a legitimate form of professional development. Teachers will find that they more easily, quickly, and satisfactorily meet the requirement for 100 hours of professional development because the work that they have traditionally done in isolation is done with the added value of their colleagues’ thinking. When teachers work collaboratively on their routine work and reflect on and continuously improve their practice, they will be driven less by the desire to earn professional development credits and more by the satisfaction of seeing the results of their learning.

Collaborative professional learning, according to Mike Schmoker, is “the best, least expensive, most professionally rewarding way to improve schools” (Schmoker, 2005, p. 137). It is the practice of educators working together to solve problems, and design and refine instruction, curriculum, assessments, and interventions for student learning. Collaborative professional learning uses practices that have long been successful in business and industry, such as quality circles, to bring teachers together within their school to co-construct, share, and distribute knowledge about teaching and learning throughout the school.

**A REWARDING WAY OF WORKING**

Teachers who have committed to work in communities of learners report that getting started requires an investment of time and effort, but the rewards are significant. They say that their work is more satisfying, that they save time because they are sharing responsibility with peers, that their work is more focused, and that they would not return to the way they previously
worked on their own. Schools in which teachers work in collaborative teams make steady progress toward improvement goals, have a clear focus, share goals, and produce results.

Collaborative professional learning will look different in large and small schools. In large schools, there are likely to be more and perhaps bigger teams. Teachers are more likely to serve on more than one collaborative team. The role of the principal, teacher leaders, and/or supervisors in coordinating and supporting the teams will be greater. Communication between and among teams will be more challenging and require more concerted effort. Creating a sense of community may be more challenging in a larger school where teachers do not work as closely together, although this is not necessarily a factor related to size, but is more closely connected to the culture within a school.

In smaller schools, teachers may serve on cross-level teams or interdisciplinary teams. Because teachers know each other better in smaller schools, teams are likely to become more productive more quickly. The principal may be able to be a member of all the teams in a smaller school. Certainly communication between and among teams will be easier. Creating a supportive culture may be easier because staff members are more likely to have a sense of community in a smaller school. Regardless of the size of the school, however, the process for creating teams is the same. The type of work teams do remains the same. The difference is the focus on multiple grades, courses, or core content areas rather than a single one.

**DOING MORE TOGETHER**

A recent study reported that a large percentage of teachers say they experience professional development, yet that the professional development they receive is not connected to their content and is not useful (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). With increased accountability, educators’ resolve to ensure that every student experiences effective teaching every day requires that the balance of professional learning shift from external to internal learning and

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**VIDEO RESOURCES**

These resources help educators see collaborative professional learning in action:

- NSDC’s definition of professional development.
  [www.nsdc.org/standfor/definition.cfm](http://www.nsdc.org/standfor/definition.cfm)
- Critical friends groups from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.
  [www.annenberginstitute.org](http://www.annenberginstitute.org)
- Designing and evaluating professional development for increased student learning from the School Improvement Network.
  [www.schoolimprovement.com](http://www.schoolimprovement.com)
- Let’s talk about PLCs: Getting started (three parts) from Solution Tree.
  [www.solution-tree.com](http://www.solution-tree.com)
- Looking at student work: A window into the classroom from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.
  [www.annenberginstitute.org](http://www.annenberginstitute.org)
- Looking at teacher work: Standards in practice
  [www.collaborativecommunications.com](http://www.collaborativecommunications.com)
- Schools that learn: High standards for teacher and principal performance
  [www.collaborativecommunications.com](http://www.collaborativecommunications.com)
- Whole-faculty study groups:
  Collaboration targeting student learning from the School Improvement Network.
  [www.schoolimprovement.com](http://www.schoolimprovement.com)
from the traditional to a reformed approach.

While both external and traditional professional learning are needed to infuse new ideas and practices into schools and classrooms, the real transformation in teacher learning happens at the school and classroom level. Implementing collaborative professional learning that embeds continuous improvement at the school and classroom level means that all students benefit from educator learning, not just some.

REFERENCES


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