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## Learning Teams

*When teachers work together,  
knowledge and rapport grow*

**By Joan Richardson**

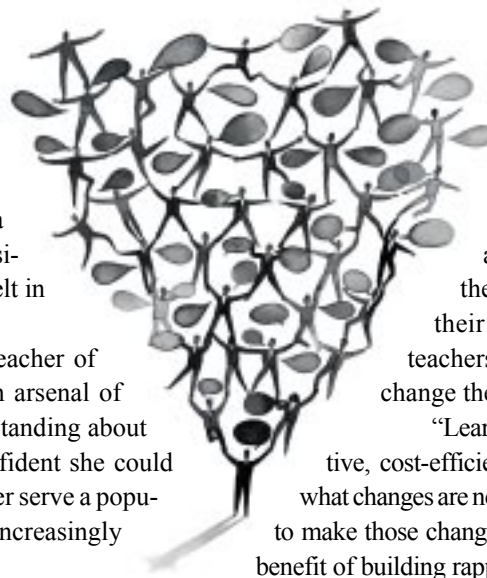
**A**fter a three-year leave of absence, Anne Jolly returned to her Alabama classroom with “more enthusiasm and anticipation than I felt in my first position.”

The former Alabama Teacher of the Year was armed with an arsenal of new ideas and deeper understanding about the profession. She was confident she could transform her practice to better serve a population of students who were increasingly diverse and needy.

But, after just a month, “far from revolutionizing my classroom practices, I was falling back into many of my same old teaching patterns. I found it increasingly hard to put a new way of teaching into operation,” she said. “The isolated classroom just wasn’t working for me anymore.”

Because of her experience, Jolly has become an advocate for learning teams as a way to improve student learning. A learning team is, quite simply, a small, collaborative group of teachers who work together in a very disciplined way to focus on a central issue all year long.

Unlike school teams that are organized for other purposes, learning teams focus on teacher learning as a way to address student needs and improve student learning, she said. (In some schools,



these teams are known as “study groups,” “impact groups,” or “collaborative teacher groups.”)

Learning teams enable teachers to keep up with the knowledge they need to do their jobs well. They also help teachers support each other as they change their practices.

“Learning teams are the most effective, cost-efficient way for teachers to learn what changes are needed in their practice and then to make those changes. They also have the added benefit of building rapport, trust, and support,” said Jolly, now an education program specialist for SERVE, the regional educational laboratory serving the southeastern states, and author of an upcoming NSDC book on learning teams in middle schools.

### **MAKING A CASE FOR LEARNING TEAMS**

Generally, the principal is the instigator for creating learning teams. But, if such teams are going to be effective, Jolly said, teachers must be involved in the final decision. “If teachers don’t support the concept, learning teams will not be successful,” Jolly said.

Unsatisfactory test scores can often be used as a prompt for creating the learning teams. But, even when that’s the case, the principal or an outside facilitator who specializes in such work will still need

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# Learning teams build rapport and knowledge

*Continued from Page One*

to present teachers with substantial information about the value of teachers learning and collaborating. (See Resources on Page 7 for more background information.)

“Teachers also need to understand that learning teams have a disciplined focus. They are focused around teacher learning, not school management. This is not a staff meeting. This is about student needs,” Jolly said.

## GETTING STARTED

After the principal has significant staff buy-in to the idea, the next issue is membership of the learning team.

Jolly recommends including no more than six persons on a team. Typically, a team would include members of a single department or a grade level. But teachers could self-select according to interest in a particular topic, Jolly said.

Taking advantage of an existing organizational structure often helps because teachers already know each other. Building on a team that already works with one group of students, as in a middle school, is also very beneficial.

A learning team needs to meet for at least an hour at a regular time once a week. Ideally, teams should meet during the school day and plan to meet together for the entire school year.

## FIRST, THE DATA

To establish its focus for the year, the learning team should assemble and examine student data: standardized test results, district assessment results, examples of teacher assignments and the resulting student work, climate survey results, demographics, and information regarding discipline, attendance, and parental involvement.

By closely examining the data themselves, teachers will be able to identify clear priorities for students. “Data also can create a sense of urgency that’s needed to drive change,” Jolly said.

Jolly cautions that teachers must also look below the surface of the numbers and probe for deeper explanations. For ex-

ample, if students are doing poorly on a statewide writing test, teachers will want to ensure that they know what’s being evaluated. Students may be quite successful grammatically and structurally but fail to understand how to present a cohesive idea — or vice versa. Students may be quite successful writing stories or poems but less proficient at informational writing.

## DEVELOP A LEARNING PLAN

After a learning team has its focus, the next step is crafting a learning plan. (See Page 3 for an example.)

At a minimum, the learning plan should include responses to these questions.

- What do students need to learn to do better? For example, drawing from the example above, the learning team might say that “Students need to improve the quality of their informational writing.”
- What specific knowledge or instructional skills do teachers need in order to address student achievement in this focus area?
- How will teachers acquire this knowledge and these skills?
- What information do teachers need?
- How will teachers know if they have achieved their goal?

Jolly said teams should consider the learning plan a “work in progress” that will be revised as teams learn more.

## DOING THE RESEARCH

After identifying its focus, each learning team should query its own members to learn what knowledge they can share with others about the focus of their inquiry.

For example, ask team members about workshops they have attended that bear on the topic. What articles or books have they read that relate to this topic? What did they learn in graduate courses about this topic? Have they done any writing or presenting on this topic? What other knowledge do team members have that might be related to this topic?

“This helps teachers view each other as resources. It’s a strategy to begin bringing out different strengths,” Jolly said.

Beyond that, however, Jolly believes the facilitator should be the group’s primary researcher. “Teachers are already pretty well overwhelmed. The facilitator needs to make it as easy for the teachers as possible. Teachers don’t need to go out and beat the bushes to find everything,” she said.

## SHARING THE WEALTH

Initially, teachers may spend a great deal of time reading articles and books, interviewing experts, or watching videotapes. In each instance, they should spend time reflecting on what they have learned.

At some point, they should be ready to put what they are learning into action. During one meeting, they may visit the classroom of a teacher using a strategy they want to see in practice. They may examine samples of student work, both before they begin changing their practice and after introducing new strategies to discover their impact. They may develop a lesson at one meeting and follow up the next week by discussing their experience with it.

At every step, the learning team needs to maintain a journal that is the weekly record of its work, Jolly said. (See Page 4 for an example.)

The learning team journal should be kept in a public place, such as the teachers’ workroom so other staff members can also read the record.

## EVALUATE YOUR WORK — AND IDENTIFY YOUR NEXT INQUIRY

Finally, learning teams need to evaluate their work.

At the end of one year’s work, Jolly said teams will often have numerous ideas about the inquiries they want to make during the next year.

“By the end of a year, teachers will have realized that this is a teacher learning experience. This is not just about coming up with a new strategy for the classroom. This is all focused on teachers learning more about their students and their teaching,” she said.

# Learning Plan

## COMMENTS TO FACILITATOR

Use this form to help the learning team describe its plan for learning.

Team members should consider the learning plan a “living document.” As the team learns more about its focus area, the learning plan should be revised.

Each copy of the learning plan should be considered public and posted or made available some place in the school that is open to all teachers, such as a teachers’ workroom. This will allow other teachers to be aware of the team’s work and share relevant resources.

1. What is the learning team’s focus?

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2. What do students need to learn to do better?

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3. What specific knowledge or instructional skills do teachers need in order to address student achievement in this focus area?

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4. How will teachers acquire this knowledge and these skills?

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5. What information do teachers need?

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6. How will teachers know if they have achieved their goal?

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# Learning Team Journal

## COMMENTS TO FACILITATOR

The learning team should appoint a recorder for its weekly meetings. That person should maintain the team's regular learning journal.

The team journal should be kept in a binder some place in the school that is open to all teachers, such as a teachers' workroom, along with the team's learning plan.

Individual members should also be encouraged to keep their own journals, either using this form or creating a form that works best for them. These journals do not have to be shared with others.

Team \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date \_\_\_\_\_  
 Time \_\_\_\_\_  
 Location \_\_\_\_\_

Team members present:

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Topic of discussion

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Key new ideas and information (from research)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Activities since last meeting and additional discussion

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Plans and classroom applications (before next meeting)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Concerns/reflections/recommendations

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Plans for next meeting

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Today's best practice or idea (to be shared with other teams)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

# Learning Team Survey

School \_\_\_\_\_ Subject/grade level \_\_\_\_\_

1. How many times have you met with your learning team?

1-3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4-6 \_\_\_\_\_ 7+ \_\_\_\_\_ Have not met \_\_\_\_\_

2. What rating best describes your feelings about these meetings? *Scale: 1 (most negative) to 10 (most positive).*

Most negative (-)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Most positive (+)
Unproductive											Productive
Non-task oriented											Task oriented
Not well facilitated											Well facilitated
Incompatible group members											Compatible group members
Less than honest communications											Honest communications

3. What, if any, are the positive impacts of these meetings on you personally?

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4. What, if any, are the negative impacts or concerns you have had with the learning team meetings?

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5. Rate the benefit of participating on a learning team. *Scale: 1 (not much benefit) to 5 (a great deal of benefit).*

**To what extent have you gained ...**

**Circle choice**

New knowledge about teaching and learning?	1	2	3	4	5
New insights about how to reach certain students?	1	2	3	4	5
New ideas about how to improve the way you teach?	1	2	3	4	5
New perspectives on your strengths and weaknesses in teaching?	1	2	3	4	5
A new outlet for expressing and sharing frustrations, concerns, problems with teaching?	1	2	3	4	5
Greater confidence in using a wider range of instructional and assessment methods?	1	2	3	4	5
A stronger sense of connection or support from other teachers?	1	2	3	4	5
A greater sense of yourself as a professional?	1	2	3	4	5

6. With regard to your selected team focus, how successful has your group been with each activity listed here?

*Scale: 1 (not at all successful) to 5 (extremely successful).*

**How successful has your learning team been with ...**

**Circle choice**

Analyzing and discussing student needs?	1	2	3	4	5
Reading research and studying successful strategies for addressing student needs, and discussing applications of what we have read/studied?	1	2	3	4	5
Discussing similarities and differences in teachers' approaches and beliefs about teaching?	1	2	3	4	5
Investigating programs, strategies, and materials that might help motivate students?	1	2	3	4	5
Designing new materials, lessons, or assessments for students?	1	2	3	4	5
Trying out new techniques, materials, approaches in teaching and assessing students?	1	2	3	4	5
Sharing successful strategies you currently use?	1	2	3	4	5
Assessing and sharing results of new approaches to teaching with the learning team?	1	2	3	4	5

*continued on Page 6*

# Learning Team Survey *continued*

7. Of the teachers on your learning team, how many do you think believe the learning team approach has significant potential to help teachers improve students' motivation and performance? \_\_\_\_\_ (give number)
8. Below is a list of activities that support teacher growth and development. Try to assess the activities in terms of whether they were practiced effectively at the school before the learning teams began. *Scale: 1 (not very effectively practiced) to 5 (very effectively practiced) before the learning teams began.*

### Circle choice

Teachers talked to each other about how they taught and the results they got.	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers learned from each other by watching each other teach.	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers designed lessons, assessments, or units together.	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers critiqued lessons, assessments, or units for each other.	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers reviewed the curriculum across grade levels in a particular subject.	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers developed interdisciplinary strategies to increase student interest and learning.	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers shared articles and other professional resources and read and discussed books.	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers asked each other for advice and help with particular students and topics.	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers visited other schools to examine instructional approaches in other settings.	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers worked together to examine student classroom tests and other student work samples to better understand student strengths and weaknesses.	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers provided moral support and encouragement to each other in trying new ideas.	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers helped each other implement ideas from workshops they attended.	1	2	3	4	5

9. In your opinion, what percent of your students have benefited from your learning team participation?  
 Less than 25% \_\_\_\_\_ 26-50% \_\_\_\_\_ 51-75% \_\_\_\_\_ 76% + \_\_\_\_\_

10. Indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements based on your experiences so far with the learning team. *Scale: 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal).*

### I think my participation on the learning team will ...

### Circle choice

Improve my overall teaching effectiveness.	1	2	3	4	5
Improve my skills in helping students learn.	1	2	3	4	5
Change my perceptions about some students' learning abilities.	1	2	3	4	5
Increase my understanding of how to motivate students to work harder.	1	2	3	4	5
Significantly change how I teach.	1	2	3	4	5
Significantly change how I work with other teachers.	1	2	3	4	5

11. Indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements. *Scale: 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).*

### Circle choice

I am enthusiastic about my participation on a learning team.	1	2	3	4	5
I feel a lot of stress during the workday.	1	2	3	4	5
I need more time for learning team participation.	1	2	3	4	5
I am satisfied with my work environment here.	1	2	3	4	5
I am excited by my students' accomplishments this year.	1	2	3	4	5
Student motivation is a major problem here.	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers here tend to do their own thing in the classroom with little coordination.	1	2	3	4	5
I often feel unsure of my teaching.	1	2	3	4	5
Teachers here get along well.	1	2	3	4	5

Source: SERVE, Atlanta.

## Resources for

# learning teams

***The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups***, by Robert Garmston and Bruce Wellman. (Christopher-Gordon Publishers, 1999). A guidebook to aid schools in developing the individual teacher talent and energy necessary to improve student learning. Recipient of the 1999 NSDC Book Award. Available through NSDC's Online Bookstore, [www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm](http://www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm). Item #B80. Price: \$55, non-members.

***A New Vision of Staff Development*** by Dennis Sparks and Stephanie Hirsh. (ASCD and NSDC, 1997). Describes three powerful ideas that drive the new paradigm for staff development: Results-driven, systems thinking, and constructivism. Includes case studies of schools and districts that are putting theory into practice. Available through NSDC's Online Bookstore, [www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm](http://www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm). Item #B50. Price: \$22.45, non-members.

***Professional Learning Communities: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement***, by Rick DuFour and Robert Eaker. (National Education Service, 1998). Research-based recommendations that enabled one school to earn the Blue Ribbon Award from the U.S. Department of Education on three separate occasions.

Includes sections on curriculum development, teacher preparation, school leadership, professional development programs, school-parent partnerships and assessment practices. Available through NSDC's Online Bookstore, [www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm](http://www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm). Item #B77. Price: \$30, non-members.

***Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement*** by Shirley Hord. (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 1997). Describes the look and feel of a professional learning community as well as providing strategies for developing the same. A full text of the book is available online at <http://www.sedl.org/pubs/change34/>. It also can be ordered by visiting SEDL's web site and clicking on catalog.

***Whole-Faculty Study Groups: A Powerful Way to Change Schools and Enhance Learning***, by Carlene Murphy and Dale Lick. (Corwin Press, 1998). Offers practical guidance for starting, leading, and maintaining faculty study groups. Includes case studies as well as tools to help implement study groups. Available through NSDC's Online Bookstore, [www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm](http://www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm). Item #B64. Price: \$37, non-members.

## From the NSDC library

**P**ast issues of NSDC publications have focused on a number of strategies that would benefit a school that is working with learning teams. This is just a sampling of other resources that can be found on the NSDC web site, [www.nsd.org/library.htm](http://www.nsd.org/library.htm), or ordered through the NSDC Online Bookstore.

- Developing norms was the focus of the August/September 1999 issue of *Tools for Schools*.

- Action research was the focus of the February/March 2000 issue of *Tools for Schools*.

- Collecting data was the focus of the October/November 2000 *Tools for Schools* and the Winter 2000 issue of the *Journal of Staff Development*

- Examining student work was the focus of the February/March 2001 issue of *Tools for Schools* and the May 2001 issue of *Results*.

## Tools For Schools

ISSN 0276-928X

*Tools For Schools* is published five times a year (August, October, December, February and April) by the National Staff Development Council, PO Box 240, Oxford, OH 45056, for \$49 of standard and comprehensive membership fees. Periodicals postage paid at Wheelersburg, OH 45694.

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# Ask Dr. Developer



**Dr. Developer has all the answers to questions that staff developers ask.**

**(At least he thinks he does!)**

## 7 good reasons to join the team

**Q** *The school year has just started and already my principal wants teachers to divide into learning teams. I'm already an excellent teacher and I find it hard to believe that taking time away from my classroom is somehow going to help my students learn more. My students need more of my time, not less! Why would my students benefit if I spend more time with other teachers?*

**A** Learning teams can benefit you and your students in at least seven ways. (I could come up with more reasons but the editor never gives me more space!)

- 1) Having teachers participate in learning teams is a powerful example for your students about the importance of learning. When students see you learn, they are seeing that their teachers value learning for themselves as well as for their students. You can build on that for your students by making direct and frequent references to the learning that you're doing, pointing out what you learned and what you do in your classroom as a result of that learning.
- 2) Learning teams give teachers an opportunity to experience a way of learning that they can use with their students. As

teachers become more comfortable with this style of learning, they are more likely to borrow these ideas for their classrooms.

3) Working with colleagues on issues focused on student learning builds a sense of trust in a school. That can significantly alter the atmosphere in a school and in a district.

4) Learning teams are more efficient than pulling teachers from their classrooms and sending them to workshops to learn.

5) Learning teams respect the knowledge and skills that teachers already have. They encourage teachers to draw on resources closest to them — the other teachers in their own buildings and districts.

6) Some of the best learning that teachers do involves working alongside other teachers who are familiar with the same group of students and the expectations of the school district. That might mean talking with them about problems they face with challenging students, observing them while they teach, and offering feedback.

7) Even excellent teachers need to work with other teachers and continue to learn about their practice. Not only will other teachers benefit from the opportunities to learn from you, you will be enriched by spending this learning time with your colleagues.

**Tools may be copied and used in workshops.**

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