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Group grows when the fringes mingle

I work on an amazing professional learning team. The six language arts teachers on my grade level are intelligent, dedicated, and committed to the idea that every child can learn. We regularly challenge one another to think in new ways and introduce one another to instructional practices that work. Our meetings are dynamic and our results are nothing short of extraordinary.

Yet not everyone in our building sees us in the same light. In fact, many openly wonder whether some of our decisions are hurting — rather than helping — students. Because we've adopted many non-traditional practices, we're doubted. There is often a palpable tension when we meet with "outsiders."

What adds to this tension is that we are equally skeptical of many of the instructional decisions made by those who doubt us! Through second-hand conversations or passing comments made in workrooms, we've developed strong opinions about what happens beyond our hallway, unsure of whether those actions match our school's mission to ensure student achievement.

Now, don't get me wrong. My school is a wonderful place where teachers truly care for one another.

We just don't completely trust one another!

And I would argue that this lack of trust is not unusual. With limited time to meet across departments and grade levels, teachers have few opportunities to share experiences with anyone other than their core learning teams. The frequent interactions necessary for building professional trust with individuals past our hallways are fleeting at best — and non-existent at worst.

When areas of contention arise, our judgments of one another's actions and intentions are based on little more than preconceived notions and assumptions. These assumptions cause hurt feelings that hinder our building. The productive

conflict that Patrick M. Lencioni speaks about in *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* (Jossey-Bass, 2002) rarely happens.

To move our building forward, it is time for teachers to start thriving on the edges. We must reach out to partners in other grade levels and departments, strengthening relationships with learning teams on our boundaries. We must recognize, value, and celebrate our interconnectedness. With dedicated effort by "connectors" on our staff, trust levels will grow.

While every teacher can work in informal ways to develop relationships with teams on the fringes, the most important connectors in any building are those working in roles outside of the classroom. These teachers — regardless of their official title or role — have the time to develop positive working relationships with individuals across an entire building. With effort, they can identify and advertise common ground between teams.

In many ways, this is an overlooked — yet essential — role of school-based teacher leaders. Organizational capacity in any human endeavor depends on trust that can only be built on the foundation of shared experience. Until all teachers have significant planning time to collaborate across teams, building consensus and facilitating understanding between disparate groups will fall on the shoulders of those who are already influential throughout a building.

What opportunities do you have to serve as a connector in your school? ♦



Disparate groups within a school can work to understand each other.