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## Coaches help teachers collaborate

When coaches work with teachers, they do more than support improving teaching and learning. They also model and teach skills for collaboration. Teaching is often described as a lonely job, one teachers do in isolation within their classrooms with their students. Increasingly, teachers are finding it not only necessary but also rewarding to engage intellectually with their fellow teachers.

In one of the significant studies of school improvement, Newmann and Wehlage (1995) reported that when teachers collaborate, improvement happens. Curriculum becomes more consistent, instruction is refined and more rigorous, collective responsibility increases; teachers' social-emotional support increases; student learning increases; and experimentation and risk taking expand.

Many teachers, however, are skeptical about collaboration. They believe collaboration takes time away from more important work. They are uncomfortable with differing opinions or conflict. They view time in collaboration as extra time beyond their already busy workday. As more schools move to using communities of practice, vertical and horizontal teaming, whole-faculty study groups, and other forms of teacher collaboration as designs for professional development and school improvement, teachers need multiple opportunities to learn about and work in successful teams. Shirley Hord (2003), leading researcher on professional learning communities, identified both staff and student benefits in schools where teachers work together when compared to more traditional school structures. Staff morale increases while staff absenteeism decreases; better solutions to complex problems emerge; teacher isolation decreases; and increased confidence in all members of the school community

increases. Students experience decreased dropout rates, increased academic success, lower absenteeism, and smaller achievement gaps.

Successful teams are more powerful, and even smarter, than any one individual. Yet successful teams require constant support and guidance. Teams are more than a collection of individuals; they are individuals who are committed



### COLLABORATION

Staff development that improves the learning of all students provides educators with the knowledge and skills to collaborate.

to a common purpose and who know that wisdom is generated when they pool their individual perspectives and knowledge into the whole. Teams result from establishing basic structures that are put into place as teams are forming to ensure success. Teams grow in their ability to take on complex, sensitive issues, such as members' core beliefs about important topics.

Coaches have important responsibilities in guiding teams. These responsibilities include modeling and teaching both fundamental skills of collaboration as well as facilitating teams as they work together. Fundamental skills for team collaboration include norms, decision making, communication skills, and conflict resolution.

Setting agreements about how team mem-

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