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**Unleash the problem-solving potential of educators by creating conditions that expect and support educators to collaborate and learn together.**

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## Create conditions for collaboration, learning with colleagues

**A**mong the many challenges facing public schools, educators' lack of self-efficacy receives the least attention. In spite of their education and experience, many educators lack confidence they can solve their schools' problems. They cite circumstances they do not control – lack of family support, decline of moral standards, a media saturated culture, school system bureaucracy – but they often fail to address school-based issues over which they *do* have control. The good and bad of most schools is due to good and bad decisions educators make, or productive and unproductive actions they take.

The National Staff Development Council takes a more hopeful approach, as expressed in one of its belief statements: “*Schools’ most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.*” The statement does not limit the problems capable of solution to those that are simple or those that relate only to professional development. Instead, it refers to “*schools’ most complex problems.*”

As is true of many of NSDC's beliefs, this one goes against the grain of conventional wisdom. This belief does not assume that the central office, state department of education, state legislature, or federal government should or can solve local schools' problems. These interlocking layers of the public education system often act in ways that aggravate or ameliorate schools' challenges, but critics greatly exaggerate the control these entities have on day-to-day events within schools.

For educators to make the transition from problem-shifters to problem-solvers, school systems must take the lead. School boards and superintendents can begin by communicating their expectation that solving schools' problems is not solely the principal's job, but rather the responsibility of all educators in a school. One element of that responsibility is taking the

initiative to solve problems, rather than waiting for others to do so. School systems will want to recognize and reward instances where educators' collaboration and initiative leads to successfully solving a significant school problem.

At the same time, school systems will need to reflect on actions that have discouraged educators' problem-solving initiative. Has central office transferred a principal who solved problems by acting “outside the box”? Is there a school culture that isolates teachers who take extraordinary, but successful, actions to address students' learning problems? So long as such actions persist, educators will conclude there is more risk than reward in seeking to solve a school's problems.

The most effective antidote to educators' passivity is to foster each school's development of learning teams that engage all the school's professionals. With effective support and facilitation, these teams have potential to begin taking responsibility for identifying and solving their schools' “*most complex problems.*” Teams may be surprised to find the essence of a solution in the idiosyncratic practice of one of their own school's educators. Assuming the problem is pervasive, one or more educators are likely to have relatively greater success in addressing it than their peers. A learning team can search out and build on such a practice that can provide a pathway towards solving the problem.

Over many decades, public schools have evolved into cultures in which educators teach and learn while minimally engaged with their colleagues. This has denied them the valuable experience and intellectual resources of their peers, and the cost has been high. Now is the time for school systems to unleash the problem-solving potential of educators by creating conditions that expect and support educators to collaborate and learn together.