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School-based learning teams give educators a chance to reflect and grow

Forty years ago, advocates for change used the term "consciousness raising" to describe an event or process that prodded people to think in new ways. Like other rhetoric of the past, the phrase has fallen into disuse, but increased awareness and new thinking continues to be necessary. That is certainly the case in public education.

Too many students continue to perform at "below basic" or comparable levels, unaware that their languishing performance threatens their futures. Too many educators focus only on day-to-day challenges in their classrooms, lacking stimulation or incentive to consider how their practice affects student achievement. This is why one belief statement of the National Staff Development Council is: *"Student learning increases when educators reflect on professional practice and student progress."*

Whether in life or education, the process of reflection is valuable. It creates distance between an individual and his or her actions, potentially creating a 360-degree perspective that leads to new understanding and insights. Without engaging in reflection, people continue to behave in ways that are counterproductive rather than understanding the need to develop behaviors that are more rewarding.

Reflection is particularly difficult for educators because their employer school systems assume that if educators have certain credentials, they should be able to execute their assigned duties competently. Reflection is not part of their job description, so educators barrel forward, busily carrying out their assignments. However, they are under increasing pressure to demonstrate that they do more than teach or lead; they are also responsible for increasing student achievement. Alas, in the absence of reflection, educators are unable to gain insights necessary to modify and improve their practice so student achievement increases.

Given the demands on educators, few are likely to spontaneously reflect on the relationship between their practice and the achievement of their students. Expecting school systems to mandate "reflection" in educators' job descriptions is also not realistic. If school systems believe reflection is an important prerequisite for educators to improve their practice and the achievement of their students, what actions could they take to support it?

Creating school-based learning teams can provide a context in which educators routinely engage in reflection. There is safety in a group process that values self-examination and candor; providing such an environment should be a priority for learning teams. Reflection is important for a team because a team cannot accurately identify its collective learning needs without first understanding the needs of individual members. Team members need the opportunity to explore questions, dilemmas, and doubts, and gain perspective on their practice and its results. This reflection is only possible in teams that support their members, providing a sanctuary where they can acknowledge "what's not working" without fear of their peers' judgment.

Learning teams may also prompt reflection by facilitating intra-school and inter-school class observations. Witnessing a colleague's success in increasing the achievement of students who are similar to those of the observing educator can be an eye-opening experience. There may be a comparable result when one or more team members attend NSDC conference sessions led by successful educators.

Reflection is in some respects an invisible asset that nevertheless can be a powerful lever to increase the performance of educators and students. School systems that create structures to facilitate reflection will ultimately see its results in higher student achievement.