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Tools FOR SCHOOLS

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS AND LEADERS

The evolution of a PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TEAM

BY ANNE JOLLY

Teachers in your school already may work in school-based teams and committees. Groups of teachers may meet to plan specific school activities, develop the school improvement plan, or help with a special school initiative. Perhaps teachers in your school also plan together as departments.

But as groups prepare to meet in learning teams, questions may flash through teachers' minds or even be asked aloud.

How is our professional learning team work going to be different from any other teacher meeting? Don't we work together already?

In typical meetings, teachers gather to plan department activities, work on discipline issues, discuss logistics for school events, address school improvement issues, or work on planning a unit. The focus of these traditional meetings might shift from week to week, and meetings frequently address several different topics.

Professional learning team meetings, on the other hand, have one primary purpose: improved teaching and learning in an area of identified student need. These meetings are about teacher professional learning and growth. The reason for meeting is simple: Better teaching results in better student learning.

The aim is *not* to develop professional learning teams. The purpose is to provide a way for teachers to become increasingly accomplished instructors for the ultimate benefit of students.

THE MAGNITUDE OF CHANGE

In introducing teachers to information about

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WHAT'S INSIDE

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The evolution of a professional learning team

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TEAM BASICS

Teams are the vehicles for teacher professional growth and ongoing learning focused on effective classroom instruction.

Teams develop a shared goal based on student needs as determined by a variety of data and information.

Teams meet regularly throughout the school year and use an organized approach to guide their work.

Team members rotate roles and responsibilities.

Team activities revolve around a decision-making cycle that engages teachers in questioning, studying, reflecting, planning, experimenting, monitoring, revising, and assessing instructional effectiveness and student progress.

Teams establish multiple channels for regular communication and sharing among school faculty, other educators, and other stakeholders.

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professional learning teams, keep in mind that formidable foe — years of ingrained and accepted practice in isolation. Morton Inger (1993) notes: "By and large … teacher collaboration is a departure from existing norms, and in most schools, teachers are colleagues in name only. They work out of sight and sound of one another, plan and prepare their lessons and materials alone, and struggle on their own to solve their instructional, curricular, and management problems." Conflicts between the current way of doing business in schools and collaborative initiatives may limit implementation, effectiveness, and ultimately, sustainability of professional learning teams.

NSDC'S BELIEF

Schools' most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.

Although most teachers have informal conversations and often assist individual colleagues, fewer teachers regularly take part in formalized meetings that promote systematic group sharing. And most teachers, it's safe to say, do not engage in joint work that promotes interdependent professional learning and teaching. The aim of professional learning teams is to build teachers' skills in engaging in collaborative joint work. As teachers gain experience collaborating, these meetings continually evolve and change.

This story from a North Carolina middle school illustrates the fluid and evolutionary nature of professional learning teams.

TEAM PROGRESS OVER TIME

When 8th-grade teacher Molli Rose first heard the news, she felt a surge of apprehension. She took a deep breath and thought, "*How am I going to do this? How are any of us going to pull this off?"* It's not that Rose and other teachers at Chowan Middle School in Tyner, N.C., didn't see the value in the new, schoolwide focus on reading. It's that some of the staff felt ill-equipped to tackle the imposed challenge.

The goal of the initiative was clear: to improve all students' reading comprehension skills. Determining how to reach this school goal, however, was less clear. In spring 2001, the school decided to help teachers learn to teach reading in all subjects across the three grade levels. To help improve instructional strategies, the school used an outside consultant from SERVE Center at the University of Carolina at Greensboro. The consultant worked throughout the year to implement professional learning teams that would focus on helping all teachers in the school become accomplished teachers of reading.

Christy Casbon, SERVE communications specialist, tells this story. The school already used teaming and provided common planning time for teachers to work together as departments and in core groups. The principal designated one of the existing planning times each week for professional learning team work. During this designated 60-minute block, teachers studied research-based practices in reading, considered strategies that might work with their students, and developed lessons and approaches they could pilot in their classrooms.

Unsurprisingly, when professional learning teams were first mentioned, Chowan teachers weren't delighted about participating in what they suspected was yet another meeting that would eat up time. They also weren't thrilled at the idea of planning teaching strategies every week with colleagues in other disciplines. And they weren't sure about the process itself. Why was it necessary? How did it differ from other planning meetings?

Despite their doubts, the teachers gamely undertook the work. Each team comprised four teachers who shared common students. Team members began by sharing what they were doing already to assist students in reading. They looked at literature about teaching reading and decided which strategies could best help their students. Next, they chose common strategies, used these in their classrooms, met to reflect on students' responses to the strategies, and worked together to revise their instruction and monitor students' learning. The teams kept logs to document their progress, how they were collaborating, and what they were learning and doing. They shared these

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Types of collaboration

Teachers may feel that they already engage in regular collaborative activities, and they generally may — to a degree. Many experience at least four types of collaboration with regard to teaching and instructional practices:

Informal conversations. This is the most basic stage of collaboration and generally takes place in the hallway, lunchroom, or at times when teachers meet informally during the school day. While teachers may discuss instruction, researcher J.W. Little (1990, p. 6) is skeptical of the idea that "brief stories told of classrooms could advance teachers' understanding and practice of teaching." These types of conversations can, however, promote collegial relationships among the staff.

Individual assistance. Teachers generally are agreeable to advising colleagues when asked. How much this advice actually improves a colleague's teaching practice depends on the quality of the questions asked, the quality of the advice given, and the follow-up provided. Formal coaching and one-on-one or mentoring programs often produce genuine benefits and advancement for teachers. However, a coaching or mentoring program alone may not be enough to overcome the norms of isolation and individualism that pervade a school's culture.

Group sharing. When groups meet, teachers often share ideas, lesson plans, and materials with one another. Most learning team meetings begin with this stage. In fact, group sharing may even be a necessary first step in developing more meaningful collaboration. Inger (1993) notes that teachers need time to overcome years of habit and organizational separation, and sharing can be a safe and enjoyable activity for them. While such sharing is a good use of time in early meetings, without careful guidance teams may never deepen and expand their collaborative work to the next level.

Joint work. When groups of teachers work together as interdependent colleagues and rigorously examine together teaching and learning, they are engaging in mature, collaborative work. In this type of collaboration, teachers *learn* together. They jointly develop and coordinate their instructional practices. Teachers develop a collective sense of responsibility for each team member's success and feel joint responsibility for the students they teach. When this type of collaboration occurs schoolwide, the school becomes a professional learning community in the truest sense.

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logs electronically with the principal, the entire faculty, and SERVE staff.

Building collaborative skills across the faculty took time. "During year one, most teachers didn't see the relevance of learning teams," admits Shannon Byrum, a Chowan 8th-grade teacher. In the second year, however, teachers' thinking noticeably shifted. The faculty began to develop a sense of trust and willingness to experiment. Rose, for example, videotaped herself modeling a reading strategy in her class. The lesson wasn't highly successful, and she knew it, which is precisely why she shared the video with her team. She asked them to critique the lesson, help her determine why the approach didn't work, and offer suggestions for how to improve it. She had another motive for sharing, too. "Teachers usually see videos of accomplished teaching and don't know how the teacher reached that point," says Rose. "I wanted to show them where I started. This is as real as it gets!"

In the second year, teams e-mailed their logs to the entire school staff to encourage schoolwide sharing of ideas. Not only were teachers realizing the value of collaborating on instruction, but they also saw the importance of continual learning. "I know now that last year wasn't a waste after all," says Byrum. "You have to evolve to this point."

District administrators were impressed as well. "Our goal was to create an environment where self-directed learners met high expectations," says Allan Smith, superintendent of Edenton-Chowan Public Schools. "Professional learning teams have provided the framework whereby teachers direct their own focused professional growth to this end." ■

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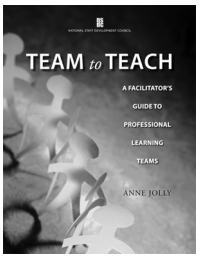


Excerpted from *Team to Teach: A Facilitator's Guide to Professional Learning Teams*, by Anne Jolly. Oxford, OH: NSDC, 2008.

See p. 8 for more details.

NSDC **TOOL**

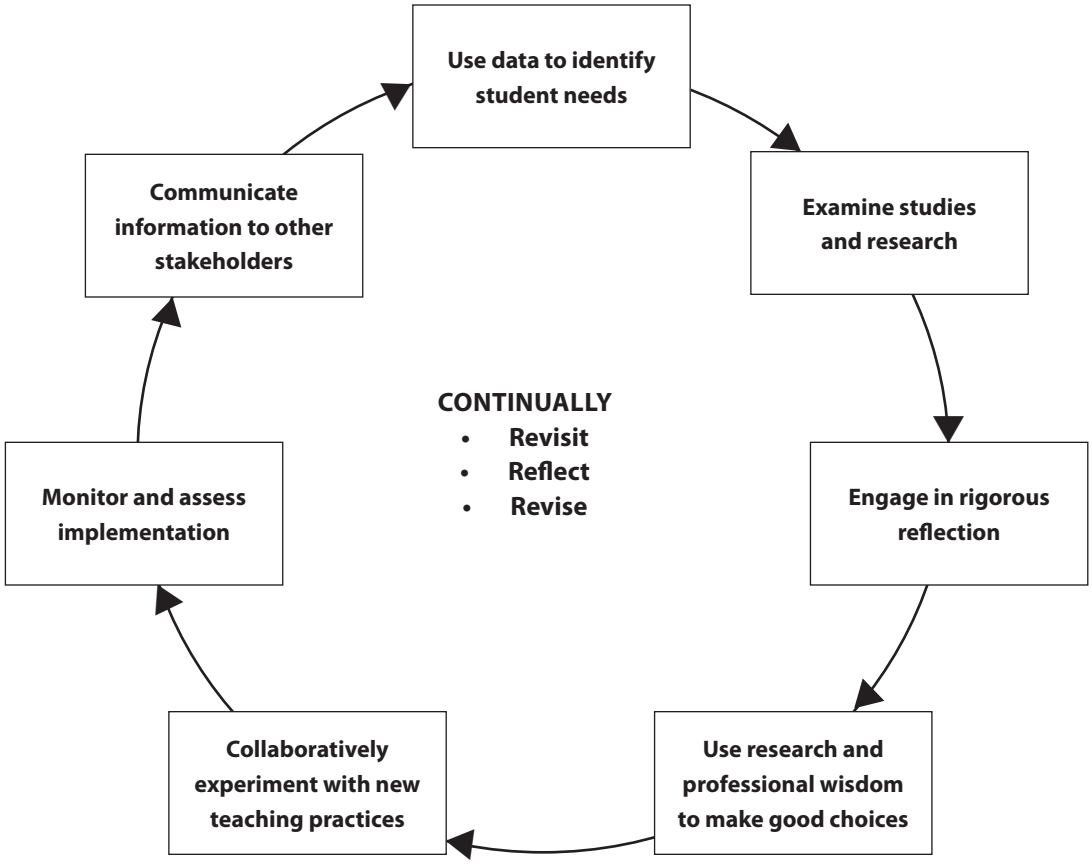
The professional learning team decision-making cycle

PURPOSE: This tool can be a reference throughout the year to help groups keep the professional learning team process in focus and on track during discussions and activities. Team members need autonomy in making decisions about the direction their team will take. Point out that this cycle illustrates the value of team members' professional wisdom in selecting and applying appropriate practices.

TIME: 15 minutes

STEPS:

1. Copy and laminate this tool for each team.
2. Suggest that teams post the cycle in their meeting room where they can easily refer to it during their meetings.
3. Discuss the cycle with teachers.
4. Note its focus on teachers' professional wisdom and judgment and their autonomy to decide what activities will help them better meet student needs.
5. Call attention to their freedom to experiment with new practices, the need to monitor and assess implementation, and the importance of communicating what they are learning schoolwide.
6. Point out that the process is not necessarily linear, that teams will go back and forth among the steps of the cycle throughout the year.



Adapted from the Evidence-Based Decision-Making Cycle, SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Reprinted from *Team to Teach: A Facilitator's Guide to Professional Learning Teams,* by Anne Jolly. Oxford, OH: NSDC, 2008.

Meeting overview checklist

NSDC **TOOL**

Directions: There is no single way to conduct learning team meetings. This list suggests ideas for some activities. Refer to this list periodically for ideas that might have value for your team. Include as many activities as possible throughout the year.

ALL MEETINGS

- Communicate! Keep records (logs) of all team meetings. Include big ideas from the meeting discussions, decisions made, and plans for the next meeting. After each meeting, e-mail the log or post it on a school wiki. Read logs from other teams and offer insights.
- Plan the next meeting.

INITIAL MEETING(S)

- Take care of team logistics.
- Set team norms.
- Determine a team goal.
  1. Look at a variety of student data and information.
  2. Decide on an area in which teachers need to increase their expertise, based on where students need the most help.
  3. Plan an initial course of action.
  4. Determine what information and resources are needed.

CONTINUING MEETINGS

- Examine research and information (books, articles, etc.).
- Share, develop, and/or modify instructional practices to address student needs.
- Coordinate and systematically apply new instructional practices in classrooms.
- Monitor student responses.
- Reflect on and discuss classroom applications and make needed adjustments.

POSSIBLE MEETING ACTIVITIES

- Develop joint or coordinated lessons.
- Examine student written work.
- Examine videotapes or DVDs of student responses to particular activities.
- Examine teacher assignments.
- Observe other team members or teachers using specific activities with students.
- Observe a videotape or DVD of a colleague implementing a particular strategy.
- Discuss the effectiveness of teaching strategies and approaches.
- Monitor the team's progress toward instructional goals.
- Monitor the team's functioning as a collaborative group.
- Keep the team's work public. Post logs on web sites, e-mail logs and activities schoolwide, engage other teachers, run ideas by the faculty, and honor their input.
- Develop a tool kit of information and practices that can serve as a resource for other teachers.
- Modify and improve the professional learning team process throughout the year.

REFLECT: Keep a list of additional activities in which your learning team engages over the course of the year, and make these ideas available to other teams.

Reprinted from *Team to Teach: A Facilitator's Guide to Professional Learning Teams,* by Anne Jolly. Oxford, OH: NSDC, 2008.

NSDC **TOOL**

Appropriate use of learning teams

PURPOSE: This activity can get teachers thinking about suitable activities for team meetings and which activities might be better for other types of meetings. Note that these are suggestions. If your situation leads you to prefer a different response than the one listed at the end of these activities, then use your professional wisdom while keeping in mind the purpose of these meetings — to focus on teacher professional learning.

TIME: 1 hour

STEPS:

1. Make a copy for each teacher.
2. Ask each to put a check mark in the thumbs-up or the thumbs-down column for each activity, depending on whether he or she thinks the activity is appropriate for a learning team. Thumbs-up indicates the activity is appropriate; thumbs-down indicates an inappropriate activity.
3. Lead teachers in a discussion of their responses.

Professional learning teams:

		
1. Keep the same team members all year.		
2. Focus on school improvement issues.		
3. Coordinate and improve classroom teaching strategies.		
4. Keep the same focus for the entire school year.		
5. Work on curriculum alignment and mapping.		
6. Examine student work and analyze student thinking.		
7. Look at and apply research-based information on teaching.		
8. Focus on classroom management and discipline.		
9. Meet at the school and during the school day.		
10. Examine the impact of new teaching strategies on students.		
11. Include the principal as a member of the team.		
12. Rotate responsibilities among team members.		
13. Focus on teacher professional learning and growth.		
14. Discuss department or grade-level issues.		
15. Observe colleagues using relevant teaching strategies.		
16. Attend all learning team meetings.		
17. Document team activities and discussions in a meeting log.		
18. Work on procedures for improving standardized test scores.		
19. Discuss administrative and front-burner issues.		
20. Share team logs and accomplishments schoolwide.		
21. Keep the team size small (three to five members).		
22. Study a book about instruction (book study).		
23. Meet on an as-needed basis.		
24. Keep a focus on classroom instruction.		
25. Periodically evaluate team functioning.		

Reprinted from *Team to Teach: A Facilitator's Guide to Professional Learning Teams,* by Anne Jolly. Oxford, OH: NSDC, 2008.

Appropriate use of learning teams — answer guide

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The following suggested answers and information will help guide the follow-up.

1. Thumbs-up. The idea is to keep teams as stable as possible. If teams meet during planning periods and their schedule changes each semester, then a new team might have to form each semester.

2. Thumbs-down. School improvement issues generally are not focused on teacher professional learning and should be reserved for a different meeting.

3. Thumbs-up. A focus on teaching strategies is a means of improving instruction and is the heart of professional learning.

4. Thumbs-up. Teams would find it difficult to study, practice, and gain deep knowledge of ways to address a student need, such as comprehending written text, while simultaneously addressing another need — in mathematics, for example. This does not mean that teachers should not address other areas, but they might do so in department or other meetings. In learning team meetings, teachers take time to work to become accomplished in a particular area and permanently incorporate specific changes into their instruction.

5. Either thumbs-up or thumbs-down. Curriculum mapping engages teachers in identifying curriculum gaps that may contribute to student learning difficulties. In that sense, curriculum maps could provide data for teachers to analyze to determine areas for instructional focus. However, curriculum mapping also may be a procedural task that does not involve teachers in real professional learning or growth. As a stand-alone activity without follow-up, curriculum mapping may not fully accomplish the team's purpose.

6. Thumbs-up. Working collaboratively to analyze student work is one of the most meaningful forms of professional learning.

7. Thumbs-up. Reviewing best practices is an obvious form of professional learning.

8. Thumbs-down. An isolated focus on discipline generally does not result in more accomplished and effective instruction. learning teams often address this issue by studying research-based methods of providing effective instruction to meet the needs of a variety of learners, which often leads to a resulting drop in disciplinary issues.

9. Thumbs-up. Learning that occurs on the job allows groups of teachers to join together in continual professional growth.

10. Thumbs-up. Collecting data and analyzing results leads teachers to a greater awareness of their practices and professional growth.

11. Thumbs-down. To encourage and value teachers' ability to make decisions and be self-directed, principals should make only an appearance at team meetings. Professional learning teams are a means of building capacity within the staff. The principal may support low-performing teams by briefly serving as a member to keep meetings on track.

12. Thumbs-up. Rotating responsibilities builds leadership and stretches each member of the team in new ways, leading to professional growth.

13. Thumbs-up. The essence of learning team meetings is a focus on what teachers need to learn to improve instruction that leads to better student achievement.

14. Thumbs-down. Discussing department or grade-level issues is tempting, but this is not the same as focusing on teacher practice.

15. Thumbs-up. Observation with reflection is a direct form of professional learning.

16. Thumbs-up. Teams require participation for all members to learn to collaborate effectively and to provide the benefit of their wisdom and experience to colleagues.

17. Thumbs-up. Records of team meetings help members both recall and report progress in their professional growth.

18. Thumbs-down. Standardized test scores are data to use to make decisions about areas of student need, but are not themselves the focus for a learning team meeting. Professional learning team work will affect student test scores in the long term.

19. Thumbs-down. These discussions do not result in teacher learning and growth.

20. Thumbs-up. Sharing information reinforces team members' own understanding, benefits other teams and staff, and may result in cross-team sharing of knowledge and ideas.

21. Thumbs-up. Smaller groups give team members more opportunities to connect, participate, and express ideas.

22. It depends. Studying a book about instruction and using it as a resource for improving teaching is great, even recommended. But teachers must apply what they learned from the book study for this activity to be legitimate learning team work.

23. Thumbs-down. Learning teams require regular meetings as part of the work of continually improving.

24. Thumbs-up. Improving classroom instruction is the purpose for learning teams.

25. Thumbs-up. A periodic evaluation helps keep the team on track.

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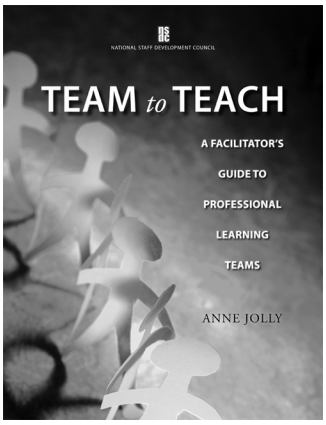
Develop learning teams to achieve your goals

"When I entered the teaching profession," Anne Jolly writes at the opening of her book, *Team to Teach: A Facilitator's Guide to Professional Learning Teams,* "a set of unwritten rules seemed to govern teacher behavior and interactions." She proceeds to describe the culture of isolation and system of norms that guided unchanging strategies that might — or might not — reach students.

Jolly has set out to change those behaviors. In a step-by-step format in this book, she guides readers through the process of forming an effective learning team that will help teachers work collaboratively. Those already meeting in groups can benefit from picking and choosing among the chapters and the myriad tools Jolly offers for each stage.

The book covers preparation for forming learning teams, implementing teams, examining results, and facilitating the process. Jolly's years of consulting on how to improve learning teams' work will help practitioners learn how to set the stage and maintain the momentum for the kind of school-based learning we now know is most effective for advancing both teachers' practices and student achievement.

School leaders, school improvement and grade-level teams, and all those who facilitate learning team meetings will find valuable insights and invaluable tools that can be copied and used right away to change the way educators work in schools today.



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