

Together, we're smarter and better

Communities of learners thrive when members collaborate skillfully. In schools, teachers are most often separated into individual classrooms, coming together only occasionally. Isolation and privatization have compromised adults' abilities to work collaboratively. A collection of individuals cannot be an effective team. Without specific effort, only pseudocommunities exist. Eventually, these false communities will fail to engage members in the complex work of effective teaching.

Over time, with commitment and opportunity to learn how to become a true community, staff members can reduce the isolation within their schools and create communities in which they thrive.

In many schools, the need for skillfulness in collaboration is growing rapidly as teachers work together in learning communities focused on improving student achievement.

"Collaboration among educators improves learning opportunities for students," Hirsh and Killion report in *The Learning Educator: A New Era in Professional Learning* (2007). "Educators are recognizing that all students benefit when they pool their collective expertise. They also realize that educating all students requires more than what any one of them knows and can do."

Congenial interaction marked by guarded interactions or competitiveness fails to tap the wisdom of the group. Teams, according to James Surowiecki (Anchor, 2005), author of *The Wisdom of Crowds*, are smarter than individuals. They develop a collective intelligence pooled from the knowledge and expertise of all members.

For example, when data in a school demonstrate that some students are not learning at the same level as other students, pseudocommunities engage in blaming, fault finding, and formulating

simplistic solutions that address symptoms rather than root causes. In true communities, members come together to assess their knowledge and skills, explore their individual and shared beliefs, challenge their current knowledge and practices with new information, formulate goals that require change in practice, and measure their success in student results.

True communities emerge when members face the need to interact differently, often as the result of a crisis or the need to innovate. Both require people to interact differently, outside their comfort zones, and often with fewer resources than they normally have.

Working together requires new relationships — relationships in which individuals are willing to share ideas, explore possibilities, listen with new openness, and appreciate differences. When adults learn the essential skills of collaboration, they accomplish more than they do alone. They are smarter together, better able to identify and solve complex problems, and are more satisfied.

Communities emerge as individual members share more about their values and beliefs, learn to appreciate those of one another, have opportunities for what Judith Warren Little calls joint work in which all members contribute to the development of something new, communicate effectively, handle conflict, and generate consensus. Each area includes a set of related skills that can be learned and practiced until they become automatic. Increasingly, as teachers form communities to plan instruction, analyze data and stu-



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COLLABORATION

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



For more information about NSDC's Standards for Staff Development, see www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm

dent work, identify interventions, reflect on their work, and evaluate its effectiveness, they will learn these skills. By engaging in authentic work in which members solve problems, analyze data, plan, and evaluate, they practice collaboration skills. When they reflect on their collaboration skills, they have opportunities to improve those skills.

Teams can assess their degree of collaboration by using surveys, guided questions, and process observers. Surveys allow team members to share their perceptions on the degree of collaboration within a team and can identify target areas for improving collaboration skills. When teams tabulate anonymous responses to provide the range, modal, and a mean, team members can determine where to focus their improvement efforts. For example, if the mean score on a survey question that asks members to rate how valued they feel within a team indicates that one or two team members feel less valued, the whole team can identify strategies to make all members feel valued and reassess several meetings later to determine whether the strategies are working.

Using reflection questions, team members can set aside time periodically, more often when they are new teams, to discuss their “teamness.” To assess the team’s collaboration skills, ask:

- How well do we listen to one another? What are some examples of times when we listened to each other and times when we didn’t?
- If a team member disagrees, what are our strategies for examining the ideas and considering them?
- To what degree do all team members take an active role in the team’s work?
- What is our most common form of decision making? What other ways might we make decisions? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each of those ways? Should we consider using another decision making process in our collaborative work?

A team can benefit from periodically having an outside observer. Process observers provide more objective data about team members’ interactions. A coach, principal, or a team member can sit just outside the team and observe, making notes about members’ interactions. Sometimes a

team member can do this while serving as a member of the team, although it is difficult to do both roles thoroughly. Process observers typically have several areas of focus for their observations that the team has determined in advance of the observation. Near the end of the meeting, the process observer shares his or her observations and allows members to discuss what actions they might take as a result of the feedback.

WHAT IS A TRUE COMMUNITY?

True communities have distinguishing characteristics, many of which relate to how team members collaborate. Team members:

- Share goals, getting clear on the outcomes they want to achieve.
- Use processes and shared leadership to advance their work.
- Willingly share ideas.
- Communicate expertly, listening fully to one another.
- Speak efficiently by making observations, stating their points of view, and making requests of one another so that members know one another at the belief and value level.
- Use one another’s expertise.
- Trust one another to keep the best interests of the team in the same high regard as their goals for student achievement.
- Enjoy one another, choosing to work collaboratively rather independently.
- Set and achieve challenging goals.
- Allow conflict because they are comfortable resolving it.
- Feel valued and appreciated for their contributions.



Skillful collaboration takes practice. Ongoing opportunities to learn how to collaborate effectively, to practice collaboration in authentic work, and to assess effectiveness strengthen learning communities, deepen their commitment to the work, and improve their results. Team members, those who support teams, and those who supervise them hold collective responsibility for teams’ effectiveness and efficiency. Strong collaboration skills coupled with authentic work are necessary to successful teamwork in schools. ◆