



Bill Ferriter is a 6th-grade social studies and language arts teacher at Salem Middle School, Apex, N.C.

## It's that simple: Avoid complexity

**Y**ou wander into your favorite pub with your colleagues after work looking for a bit of a release. Your mind is already drifting toward paradise, drawn by the powerful tang of the 25-cent chicken wings on special.

Then you sit down at your table, only to discover that one of its legs is shorter than the rest. Instantly, you're drawn back to reality — wrestling with the inevitable tips and turns that your sodas take every time an inadvertent elbow lands on the corner of your restaurant real estate. What could have been a beautiful start to a restful weekend ends with more stress.

This was the challenge tackled by a young inventor pitching to a group of venture capitalists last month on “The Dragon’s Den” — a BBC America program that I love. Having designed a pocket-sized solution to lopsided tables, this guy had me hooked. “You simply take out our tool and slide it under the shortened leg of your table. Problem solved,” he stated.

“You’ll be a vigilante wobblestopper in no time!”

To the investors in the Den, the solution was far more complicated than it needed to be. “Why would I want to buy your gadget to fix something that everyone already deals with easily? You’re making things too difficult,” they countered.

That pulled me up short. How many times do we get carried away with our own efforts and spend our time brainstorming ideas and answers to something that can be solved in a different way? Sounds a lot like failing professional learning communities, doesn’t it?

Every challenge — no matter how small — seems to require complex solutions and the input of dozens of stakeholders. School improvement teams meet for months designing lunch schedules. Grade-level colleagues debate the merits of

different heading styles for assignments. Teachers argue over the wording in team documents and struggle to find collective solutions to bathroom pass policies — believing that they’re doing meaningful work together.

Wasting energy wrestling over such straightforward situations, however, leaves teachers discouraged with collaboration at best — and ready for an immediate return to the isolated classroom at worst! Eliminating these frustrations begins by using our limited resources, especially time, wisely.

Want to be a hero to the learning teams in your building?

Start by independently addressing the simple issues facing your organization before your teams become mired in unproductive conversations. Design outlines for meeting notes and sets of suggested grade-level policies that teams can tailor. Organize systems for clearly handling discipline issues and recruit parent volunteers to tackle school fundraisers.

Then, focus groups on a handful of tasks connected to teaching and learning. Encourage the team to develop common assessments or shared mini-lessons on topics that challenge your student population. Dive into an exploration of remediation or enrichment strategies, or promote active reflection activities like action research or Japanese lesson study.

Become a vigilante wobblestopper — tackling the topics that must be addressed but remain tangential to the real work of learning communities — and you’ll guarantee that teachers’ collaborative efforts are focused where they should be: On ensuring that every child learns! ♦



**Join the conversation with Bill by visiting [www.nsd.org/blog/](http://www.nsd.org/blog/) and offering your opinion. Bill posts his provocative ideas frequently — be sure to return often.**