

Adults collaborate, students gain

By **Carla Thomas McClure**

Teacher collaboration is often mentioned in journals and reports on school improvement. Yet when a team of three researchers combed the research literature, they found few studies that empirically tested the relationship between teacher collaboration and student achievement. So the team designed a study of its own. The results, as well as findings included in a U.S. Department of Education practice guide on school turnarounds, strengthen the case for teacher leadership through collaboration.

Teacher collaboration and student achievement

To examine the relationship between teacher collaboration and student achievement, researchers Yvonne Goddard, Roger Goddard, and Megan Taschannen-Moran (2007) designed a naturalistic study. A naturalistic study involves no intervention, treatment, or randomization. Instead, the researchers used surveys to measure naturally occurring differences in teachers' levels of collaboration and test scores to measure student achievement.

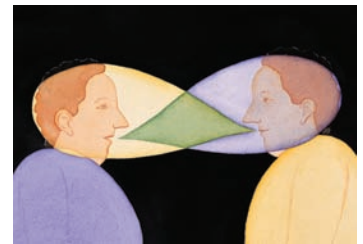
The study was conducted in a large urban school district in the Midwest. The researchers surveyed 452 teachers in 47 elementary schools to determine to what extent teachers worked collectively to influence decisions in three areas: school improvement, curriculum and instruction, and professional development. The researchers examined student achievement by examining achievement scores in reading and math for 2,536 4th graders. To determine the relationship between teacher collaboration and student achievement, they analyzed these data using sophisticated statistical methods. This approach allowed researchers to control for the effects of school

context (e.g., school size, socioeconomic status, and proportion of minority students) and student characteristics such as race, gender, free and reduced-price lunch status, and prior achievement.

The research team found teacher collaboration for school improvement purposes to be positively related to differences among schools in both mathematics and reading. "These results are important," they state, because "most prior research on teacher collaboration has considered results for the teachers involved, rather than student-level outcomes" (Goddard, Goddard, & Taschannen-Moran, 2007, p. 891). The team says further studies are needed to help educators understand the effects of various collaborative practices.

School improvement

A 2008 practice guide from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES) provides additional support for collaboration. In the guide, *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools* (<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/practiceguides>), teacher collaboration on instructional improvement is cited as a frequently observed approach in 35 chronically low-performing schools that "beat the odds" to achieve dramatic turnarounds — substantial gains in student achievement within three years. Teacher collaboration took many forms in the case studies IES examined. In some schools, teams of teachers reviewed student work against standards and used their findings to set targets for instructional improvement. In other schools, teachers shared planning time, learned about using data to guide instructional decision making, and were supported by a coach or lead teacher. Some teachers planned their own professional development



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(Herman et al., 2008).

The director of the statewide school coaching program in Tennessee, Steven Moats, says that if school leaders want to tap into the potential power of teacher collaboration and allow teachers to work together to lead change, then school leaders must do more than provide verbal support for the idea. To be effective, teacher teams need the time and resources to work together (e.g., accommodations in scheduling, access to student data, professional development) — a point supported by the IES practice guide.

Teacher benefits

According to Goddard and colleagues, past research has reported a variety of positive outcomes for teachers who collaborate with one another. Potential benefits include improved efficacy, higher levels of trust, and more positive attitudes about teaching. Researcher Ken Futernick (2007), for example, concluded from his survey of 2,000 teachers in California that teachers felt greater personal satisfaction when they established strong collegial relationships,

were involved in decision making, and believed in their own efficacy.

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