

# 13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

## SHARPENING SKILLS FOR OUR CENTURY

By Valerie von Frank

**D**ianna Kennedy's 7th-grade language arts classroom looks very different than it did a few years ago. She replaced her rows of desks with round tables and her sets of books

with a classroom library that spans varied reading levels.

Kennedy's teaching also looks very different. Her students at Craig Middle School in the Metropolitan District of Lawrence Township, outside of Indianapolis, Ind., are learning through what educators there term "authentic, project-based instruction."

"I don't do whole class novels," she said. "I might have a student with a 2nd-grade reading level sitting next to a student who's post-high school. Now, I provide a variety of options for students and I teach the standard, not the novel. I have students read at their level or slightly above, and they show me they know the standard at whatever level is appropriate."

Kennedy and other teachers at Craig have spent years working to integrate 21st century skills into their instruc-

### What's inside

#### Lessons from a coach

Julie McDonnell tailors her coaching to fit the teacher.

Page 4

#### Focus on NSDC's standards



Conflict resolution is a key skill for successful collaboration.

Page 5

#### NSDC tool

What is the trust level in your team? Here's a measure.

Page 7

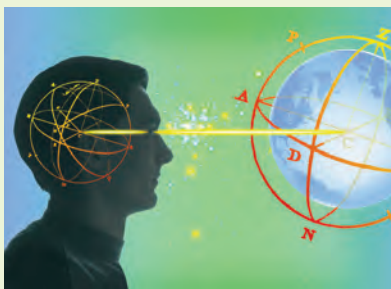


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### Beyond memorization

21st century skills, according to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, include:

- Information and communication skills;
- Critical thinking and problem solving skills;
- Ability to collaborate and to be self-directed;
- Global awareness;
- Entrepreneurial skills; and
- Civic literacy.



Source: [www.21stcenturyskills.org](http://www.21stcenturyskills.org)

tion and say they now are moving into the next phase: having students use those skills in relevant, real-world applications.

In a project last spring, Kennedy's students combined their learning in language arts, science, art, and Spanish to write, illustrate, and translate stories about preventing the spread of communicable diseases. They then shared their books with younger students.

To be successful in the workplace of the near future, some argue, students need a range of skills far different from the past (see box on p. 1). Knowledge is growing at such a rate that even the best minds no longer can keep up with memorizing content, but need to understand how to access, use, and communicate information. While there is not a uniform list of agreed-upon "21st century skills," the consensus is that the skills students will need to succeed in the future involve far more than being able to use technology — and more than the traditional content knowledge that has defined success in the past. Critical thinking skills, media literacy, communication, collaboration, global understanding, and creativity are on the list of goals for students to achieve.

**An early start**

Earlier this decade, Lawrence Township began a districtwide effort to teach for the 21st century. In 2001, the district conducted a technology audit to determine what skills students had and might need after graduation. Leaders studied research about digital age skills and identified competencies they wanted students to have:

- Basic literacy (language proficiency);
- Technological literacy (the use of computers, networks, new media);
- Visual literacy (an ability to decipher, interpret, and express ideas);
- Informational literacy (reviewing information and using it in various ways);
- Self-direction (learning to set goals and manage one's time);
- Higher-order thinking (analysis and drawing inferences).

Next, with a \$5 million grant from the Lilly Endowment, the district embarked on a plan to

**NSDC'S BELIEF**

Remarkable professional learning begins with ambitious goals for students.

change instruction through professional development around the competencies. The goal was to make every teacher responsible for students' digital age skill base.

Literacy coaches were hired for each building to work with staff, co-teaching, modeling, and leading book studies and other professional learning. The district provided a pool of substitute teachers available to take over classes for teams of teachers to meet for half- or full-day professional learning.

Kennedy was one of the literacy coaches. She said the coaches worked one-on-one with teachers, led learning sessions, and helped teachers discuss and develop strategies to focus on the 21st century skills: differentiating learning, enhancing students' self-direction, and creating authentic learning.

"We were looking at student work, talking about instruction," she said. "I wasn't all-knowing. I did a lot of reading. Through conversation, we came up with ideas, tossed them around, and tried them. Then we found what worked. It wasn't that I knew everything and handed out strategies to teachers, although I had a repertoire. Teachers, in conversation, would come up with great things to do."

**Better student engagement**

Wayne Naylor, now an assistant principal at Craig, was a classroom teacher at the time. Naylor said the shift in ideology was a challenge.

The key, he said, was he had to give up control. "Teachers want to know what the lesson is going to be," he said. "You don't know, because the kids are getting the control."

Naylor said his emphasis became student-directed learning. For example, he asked 6th graders in his science classes to complete a community service project. Rather than assigning them, Naylor left it up to the students to identify a problem in the community, figure out a solution, and execute the steps to accomplish the goal.

A couple of years ago, students said the pond in their neighborhood was neglected. They decided making it more attractive would help, so they planned a picnic table where visitors could sit. They cleaned up the trash and had a sign made asking people not to pollute. They planted trees. To get the

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necessary resources, they wrote to community sponsors and completed a successful grant proposal.

The change in approach has had “a huge impact” on student engagement and learning in the school, Naylor said. He gives the example of a 6th grader who had failing grades and was skipping class regularly. Except in Naylor’s class. When the students got the plans out for the picnic table, the boy “rose to the top.” He led the construction and figured out the math. “I saw this boy just get engaged and be the most capable kid,” Naylor said.

### After the grant

Since the grant period is over, funding is not available for the full-time coaching positions or to upgrade technology, such as roving computer carts with laptops that now are failing. Naylor is the professional developer for Craig and now helps teacher teams in the building with professional learning around best practices. He meets with professional learning teams, individual teachers, and facilitates learning sessions. Teachers are part of two learning teams, one subject-area and one grade-level. The teams meet on a rotating schedule on Tuesdays and

Wednesdays, so each team meets approximately every other week. The school provides substitute teachers to cover classes while the teachers meet for one or two class periods. Naylor also arranges for half-day sessions when groups need additional time. The district has a bank of four to five substitutes available throughout the system for teachers to request released time.

Kennedy said teachers’ experiences in book studies and earlier conversations have laid the foundation for using their more limited collaborative time now.

“We now have started to develop professional learning communities in the truest form,” she said. “Teachers have a wealth of experience now to be able to make that happen.” And their focus for their collaboration is clear.

“At Craig, we have moved along the continuum,” Kennedy said, “with the emphasis on authentic learning. We’ve taken 21st century skills to the next level. Teachers all know what the 21st century skills are, and now they are working on how to make that learning authentic.” ◆

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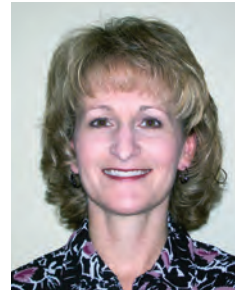
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## First, I assess how teachers learn

### Q What do you do to meet individual teachers' needs?

I use a differentiated coaching approach. If I advocate differentiating in the classroom for kids, I can't give teachers all the same thing in the same way. I can't just give a strategy and say, "Go and run with it."

I want to know what is appropriate for the teachers' learning. Do they need to reflect? Do they need to be involved? Do they need to talk it out? It makes a big difference in their success. From Jane Kise's work (*Differentiated Coaching: A Framework for Helping Teachers Change*, Corwin Press, 2006), I created an inventory based on her suggested questionnaire, and I have the teachers take it in the beginning of the year. There are a lot of resources in the book about revealing teachers' strengths, what they are challenged by, how they prefer to be coached depending on their personality type. I use that as my guide.

I do a get-to-know-you where I go to the class-

room and talk to the teachers about their students, how long they've been teaching, their background, and those types of things. One of the tools I use is the inventory. I tell them it will help me understand what will be most helpful to them and help me support them in our working relationship.

I'm very upfront with the tool. I tell teachers that it helps me learn more about them. The tool helps me understand how they process information, what they value — I look through that lens. Do they want to preview something ahead of time? Do they want to wait and talk about it out loud? Do they want the big picture or a step-by-step? Would they rather see examples of what something looks like? Others would like to brainstorm their own ideas. Then I can frame my questions better. That helps with my guidance.

They see this as a learning profile. It's modeling — me getting to know them, just as they would get to know their students. It sparks conversation. I think it's honoring teachers where they are, for who they are, and how they approach learning. ♦

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# Collaboration needs resolution skills

**W**hen the world-renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has,” she was forecasting the single most powerful strategy for addressing challenges within a community. Today, NSDC is committed to this approach to re-energize schools, honor the expertise of professionals within those schools, tap the talents of educators, refine and align professional practice to standards, and ultimately improve results for students. Yet, commitment and thoughtfulness alone are insufficient to produce what Mead describes. It takes skillfulness in collaboration.

When people gather to learn and work together, hidden dynamics help or hinder the process. These dynamics involve how well people collaborate. We take for granted the remarkable expertise needed for a group of individuals to work together as a team. We are repeatedly disappointed when the results of teamwork are divisiveness or mediocrity. We are equally awestruck when the results are more than could be imagined, the kind Mead describes.

Below the surface of any successful team is attention to developing a set of skills that members use to advance the success of the team. Collaboration skills involve clear, honest communication; decision making; giving and receiving feedback; team structures such as setting agreements or norms; problem solving; and most importantly, handling conflict. Teachers, often because they work independently within their classrooms, have few opportunities to practice and refine their collaboration skills. Interacting with their peers differs from interacting with students. The stakes are higher, the risks greater.

One skill set that distinguishes sophisticated teams from those that are less developed is conflict

**NSDC STANDARD**



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

resolution. Conflict typically emerges when a team is making a decision about something that matters. Teacher leaders can move a team from a novice state to a more advanced state by assisting teams with developing constructive strategies for addressing conflict. Strategies require developing a common knowledge base, surfacing assumptions members hold about conflict, establishing and applying a process that is explicit, and practicing skills related to open and honest communication.

Conflict is either constructive or destructive within a team. What determines how conflict affects a team is the skillfulness and attitudes of team members. When members believe conflict is bad and feel uncomfortable acknowledging it or inadequate addressing it, they will strive overtly or covertly to suppress it. Neither is healthy for the individual nor team.

Conflict emerges about insignificant and significant issues. One team member arriving repeatedly late can become a burr in the team's effective-



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**For more information about NSDC's Standards for Staff Development, see [www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm)**

ness when left unaddressed. Forgetting to bring the promised treats might seem benign, yet it may become the unspoken reason for distrust. Conflict, if a team is working on what matters to them, is inevitable. To take on weighty issues and work through them when differences in beliefs exist is the hallmark of a highly successful team. Teacher leaders can create safe places for people to air differences, focus on the topics, and surface assumptions that keep people at odds.



step toward creating a constructive approach to resolve conflict when it arises.

To create an appreciation for conflict and to handle it constructively rather than destructively, team facilitators might open the door for dialogue about team members' views about conflict. In this form of interaction, members withhold judgment or the need to reach agreement in order to

seek understanding.

Before teams find themselves in conflict, it is helpful for them to explore their beliefs about conflict and develop a strategy for addressing it. One way to do that is to share the messages they received about conflict when they were younger. These messages give team members insights into each other's views of conflict. For example, in my large family, the common message we received as children was, "Don't fight." This message suggests that disagreements were inappropriate, so I learned to leave them unspoken. That strategy worked for a while until the baggage of unspoken disagreements spilled over and I erupted in what seemed like inappropriate ways for the matter at hand. What drove my actions was rarely the matter at hand, and most often a long history of unspoken disagreements.

The outcome of dialogue is not action, but rather appreciation. In dialogue everyone has a voice and is encouraged to speak openly and honestly. Those listening are asked to receive their colleagues' comments without judgment, rebuttal, contradiction, or agreement. They are asked to speak in sentences that describe their own thinking about the topic rather than to agree or disagree with what someone else is saying. For example rather than saying, "I agree with you," or "I disagree with what you are saying," members are encouraged to say, "Your comments lead me to think about . . ." or "As I listen to you, I find myself wondering if . . ." or "The idea about \_\_\_\_\_ has me thinking that ..."

Others too have messages from their past that drive their views of conflict. It was not until I became a young adult that I realized that conflict was healthy. I acquired strategies for addressing conflict. While I continued to harbor some fear about conflict, the strategies and opportunities to practice gave me courage to understand differences when they occurred. Eventually the fear was replaced with appreciation.

When team members gain a deeper understanding of how they individually view conflict, they can leave dialogue and move to discussion to consider how to work together to address conflict. One strategy is to consider conflict like a problem and apply a creative problem-solving process. The criteria for selecting a solution for the identified problem are generated from the team's goals and the collected interests of team members rather than the desires of one member.

Team members' ability to address conflict is entangled with their experiences with conflict, their skillfulness and clear strategies for addressing conflict, and their commitment to the team's goal. Exploring team members' assumptions about conflict is more than an exercise in self-disclosure designed to help team members know each other better at the belief or value level; it is a concrete

Taking time to focus on how a team addresses conflict before conflict arises can dramatically accelerate a team's effectiveness. To support teams in becoming highly productive, teacher leaders facilitate dialogue and discussion about conflict before conflict becomes debilitating. When teams learn to address conflict constructively, they will learn too to appreciate what they are able to accomplish as a team that no one individual is able to achieve alone. ♦

**Team members' ability to address conflict is entangled with their experiences with conflict, their skillfulness and clear strategies for addressing conflict, and their commitment to the team's goal.**

# TRUST factors

**DIRECTIONS:** The characteristics below help to increase trust among team members. Build a picture of the trust level in your team by placing marks on the chart (p. 8) at the appropriate level for each trust factor. Consider your team members as a whole when indicating the level of trust.

- **Care:** We care about each other professionally and personally, and we are willing to go the extra mile for one another. We show sensitivity to one another’s needs, desires, and interests.

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- **Collaboration:** We limit our competitive tendencies to lower the barriers between us. We share power and control during the course of our work rather than hoarding it.

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- **Competence:** We believe in each other’s ability and willingness to fulfill our responsibilities effectively. We believe that everyone on our team has skills and is capable of contributing.

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- **Confidence:** We have confidence in one another, and we lean on one another. We believe we will all fulfill our obligations and do the right thing for the right reasons.

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- **Consistency:** We behave in consistent and predictable ways. Our words match our subsequent actions, and we honor our team commitments. We do what we say we will do.

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- **Integrity:** We trust each other to put the interests of students first and to make changes to meet their needs. We are clear about the intentions and motives for others’ actions.

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- **Openness:** We communicate accurately, openly, and transparently. We lay our cards on the table respectfully, and others accept who we are and what we think.

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- **Conviviality:** Our team meeting atmosphere is relaxed and enjoyable. People can be direct in their communications.

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- **Respect:** We acknowledge one another’s ideas and interact in courteous ways. We genuinely listen to one another and treat each other with dignity.

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- **Self-acceptance:** We are comfortable with ourselves. We accept ourselves and our potential.

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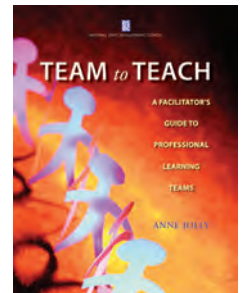
- **Support:** We verbally and publicly support each other.

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- **Familiarity:** We get to know each other. We know each other’s interests, contributions, abilities. We are aware and accepting of team members’ assets and shortcomings.

**From the book**

This is just one of dozens of tools from *Team to teach: A facilitator’s guide to professional learning teams* by Anne Jolly. Published by NSDC, this step-by-step book includes the guidelines and tools learning team leaders need to build a successful professional learning team.



Order through the NSDC bookstore at [www.nsdctestore.org](http://www.nsdctestore.org) or call 800-727-7288. Item #B394, member price: \$40.00, nonmember price: \$50.00.

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