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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

Collective responsibility makes all teachers the best

By Stephanie Hirsh

"I really wanted my daughter to be in Mrs. Meyer's class this year — everyone knows she is the best fifth-grade teacher in this school."

Over the years, I have heard such statements repeatedly. It's the beginning of the school year and too many principals and teachers face parents expressing concerns about the teachers their children are assigned. For a variety of reasons, these parents believe their children would have been better off in another teacher's classroom. They fear their children may learn less, experience less joy in learning, or feel less motivation to succeed. Empathetic principals and teachers listen and try to offer reassurance that the children will have a great year. They tell the parents that all teachers in their school will welcome their children; students will have a great year no matter which classroom they

have been assigned. And yet, savvy parents are getting smarter — they know there is no proof to back up this statement. Some parents know that there is research that suggests the single most important determinant of a student's success is the classroom teacher. When parents



raise this concern, few principals or teachers have anything substantive to say in response.

My hope is for more principals and teachers to be able to respond to these parents' concerns by assuring them that within their school, teachers share collective responsibility for the success of each student. The most important phrase in Learning Forward's definition of professional learning is collective responsibility. Schoolwide and team-based professional learning embedded in the daily work of educators is essential when professionals commit to sharing responsibility for the success of all students.

When a school fully understands and commits to collective responsibility for student success, educators are prepared to answer parents' concerns in a profound way. A deep understanding of what collective responsibility means for schools will not only reassure parents about their own children's educations but can also enlist them as advocates for job-embedded, collaborative professional learning. I am hopeful that in the near future more teachers and principals will use some of the following points to describe collective responsibility in their schools.

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Learning Forward is the new name of the National Staff Development Council.

We are an *international association of learning educators* committed to advancing professional learning for student success.

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• **Collective responsibility means** that all staff members share a commitment to the success of each student. Our teachers take pride in getting to know all the students in their grade level or particular course first, and after that they do their best to get to know the students in the grades they will serve next. When our teachers learn that any teacher or student is struggling and they have information or strategies that can help, they feel a responsibility to share it. They celebrate with their colleagues when things go well, and commit to changes when things do not go the way they had anticipated.

• **Collective responsibility means** we do not allow any single teacher to fail in an attempt to ensure success of any one student. Teachers in our school understand and appreciate the benefits of working collaboratively. Our teachers ensure their colleagues understand they are all members of the same team; whenever one teacher has a problem, the team is there for support. They use collaborative learning and planning to quickly target students experiencing learning challenges. They focus their combined attention to ensure no child falls between the cracks.

• **Collective responsibility means** our students benefit from the wisdom and expertise of all teachers in a grade

DESIGNING A CYCLE OF IMPROVEMENT

Cycles of improvement support the development of lessons and assessments that ensure higher levels of learning for all students in a particular grade or subject.

1. A team of teachers examines student performance data to determine where students may struggle in relation to the next set of objectives they must master.
2. The team clarifies the knowledge and skills they need in order to successfully teach the standards.
3. The team shares their previous experience with the objectives. Those who did not achieve the desired results learn from those who had demonstrated greater success. If no one on the team experienced the desired level of success, the group agrees to seek expertise from beyond the group.

Repeat this cycle throughout the year to build a powerful set of lessons and assessments that are used by all teachers on the team.

To view this process in action, see the *Stults Road Elementary: Professional Development in Action* video on Learning Forward's web site.



AN INVITATION

I invite you to share this description of collective responsibility with your colleagues. Enter into a discussion with the educators in your building.

The tools on pp. 4-5 will help you examine together your reflections on the current state of your school regarding collective responsibility and your aspirations for how to grow in this area.

When teams build the school's collective capacity, I'm certain that next fall you will have a much more powerful answer for any parent concerned about a class assignment. You'll also build a supportive group of parents who won't let anyone touch the time you have established for important team-based professional learning.

— Stephanie Hirsh

level or subject, rather than just their own teachers. In our school, regular time is scheduled for teams of teachers to follow a cycle of improvement designed to support the development of powerful lessons and assessments that ensure higher levels of learning for all students in a particular grade or subject (see box at left). As a result, every student experiences the same lesson and is graded by the same standard as all other students in the same grade level or subject course.

• **Collective responsibility means** our teachers feel a responsibility to share what is working in their classrooms with their colleagues. In our school, best practices spread from classroom to classroom. Teachers do not hide their most successful strategies from their colleagues. Data are transparent and teachers experiencing success are easily identified. Teachers have different strengths and areas of expertise; they are celebrated when they have success and eager to praise and learn from colleagues who experience success in other areas. This collaboration enables our teachers to observe and understand a variety of strategies they can then use to serve the individual needs of their students.

• **Collective responsibility means** teachers with less experience realize that other teachers are invested in their success and the success of all students. In our school, new and less experienced teachers are assigned buddies, mentors, and grade-level or subject-based teams. Buddies, mentors, and team members serve new teachers in a variety of ways. One may provide emotional support for overcoming the challenges teachers face early in their career. One might

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teach the ropes of the school. One may support planning for all the big firsts of a new teacher, including first days, first parent conferences, and first assessments. And one might ensure the new teachers feel supported year-round with access to great lessons, assessments, and expertise. From day one, all teachers know that their responsibility goes beyond the walls of the classroom they are assigned.

• **Collective responsibility means** our teachers learn and work together systematically on a regular basis to collectively ensure higher quality instruction in all classrooms and better results for all students. In our schools, teachers look forward to the time they have for collaborative learning and problem solving. They are deliberate in establishing their learning agenda and develop together the knowledge and skills they need to promote student success. As they gain powerful new evidence-based strategies, they design new lessons and assessments to be used in all classrooms. They make plans for visiting and observing as time permits, and they commit to future sessions focused on reflecting on the strengths and areas for improvement in each lesson they develop together. Over time they develop a rich bank of les-

sons and strategies that enable them to address individual student needs as they surface.

Learning Forward BELIEF

Every student learns when every educator engages in effective professional learning.

• **Collective responsibility means** our principals have a strong rationale for advocating for

team-based professional learning embedded in teachers' work schedule. Authentic collective responsibility cannot be achieved through mandate. Teachers need time to achieve this goal. They need time to conduct the work essential to the intended outcomes of collective responsibility. As a result of spending consistent time together, they build trust, learn to take risks, and recognize the value of reflecting on mistakes. At our school, time is scheduled during the workday for teams to meet to do this important work. Teacher leaders use the cycle of continuous improvement to guide the work of the team. They ensure the team takes advantage of every second it is allotted. In addition to scheduled workday time for team meetings, our school faculty meetings are used for learning as well. Each meeting is led by a different team where they seek help with a particular challenge they are facing or share an instructional strategy that has been successful. In addition, the early release days on our schedule are used for cross grade-level teams to build and implement plans that continue to promote a successful

COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY IS TIED TO STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Researchers have investigated the role collective responsibility plays in increasing student achievement. In a study of more than 800 U.S. high schools, Lee and Smith (1996) found a significant link between collective responsibility and student outcomes. "Considering teachers' collective responsibility for learning, the findings about its effects on adolescents are unequivocal. In schools with high levels of collective responsibility, where these attitudes are also consistent among the faculty, students learn more in all subjects. Equally important, collective responsibility is associated with less internal stratification in these outcomes by social class. We conclude that schools where most teachers take responsibility for learning are environments that are both more effective and more equitable."

Newmann and Wehlage (1995) have come to similar conclusions.

"In schools where teachers reported higher levels of collective responsibility for student learning...learning was greater in mathematics, science, reading and history" (p. 33). Within the same study, collective responsibility has been linked to achievement gains as high as 137% in mathematics and science (p. 37).

Practitioners agree that collective responsibility is important. In the most recent *MetLife survey of the American teacher* (2010), 80% of teachers and 90% of principals strongly agree that the teachers in a school share responsibility for the achievement of all students.



SOURCES

Lee, V. E., & Smith, J. B. (1996, February). Collective responsibility for learning and its effects on gains in achievement for early secondary school students. *American Journal of Education*, 104(2), 103-147.

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education experience for all students.

Establishing collective responsibility is not easy, but it is essential if we believe that our responsibility is to the success of every student in the school. This is how we achieve this goal in our school.

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