



Teamwork is not enough — there has to be learning

Schools are filled with teams of adults meeting almost daily on a wide variety of topics before, during, and after school. Despite the investment of teachers' time in these meetings, the work of some teams falls short in generating results for teachers or students. A primary reason is that team members operate from their current frames of reference and neglect an essential step of their core work — learning.

When teams come together to accomplish a task without infusing learning into their process, the end



result is predictable. In most cases the product looks similar to previous work

because nothing prompts a new approach or a new way to think about the topic. Team members might tweak a lesson plan, modify an assessment, or consider a different resource, but their overall approach changes very little. Their collective frames of reference are limited by what they currently know and do and are not enriched with new learning.

Changing or expanding frames of reference depends on professional learning. Introducing new ideas, information, skills, points of view, or practices requires that team members consciously focus on their learning.

Only then is the team transformed into a learning team.

Learning teams have some common features. First, their members share a common purpose and goals. They may share students or curriculum. Teams may be configured as grade-level, department or course-specific, vertical, or topic-focused teams. They make a commitment to use the cycle of continuous improvement to structure their work and hold themselves accountable for their results. The cycle of continuous improvement follows the process listed on p. 9 and is repeated multiple times in a single school year. Coaches and teacher leaders have a significant role to play in developing learning teams that have the capacity to be self-sufficient in implementing the cycle of continuous improvement.

The first step of the cycle of continuous improvement is fairly routine in schools today — data analysis. However, the kind of analysis suggested in this process is more specific to classroom instruction. The remaining steps of the cycle, though, are often lost in the team's effort to accomplish its shared work. The difference between doing the work and doing the work from an informed perspective can easily mean the difference between getting the results achieved previously and substantially increasing results.

What distinguishes this new form of collaboration among team members is that new learning couples with their past experiences and allows them to

understand the work differently and create new ways of thinking. Members are more open to consider alternatives. They engage in, as Judith Warren-Little calls it, joint work, work that is co-constructed by team members.

Professional learning occurs in many ways within these teams, including professional reading, studying models of practice, participating in a workshop provided by a coach, teacher leader or external expert, action research, observing others engaged in the work, seeking out experts or specialists, and experiencing. Yet professional learning is far more than the input process. It incorporates input as well as implementation and evaluation. The cycle of continuous improvement, if followed, includes all three components of professional learning. Experiencing alone, for example, is insufficient as learning unless the experience is accompanied by reflection and evaluation at the cognitive, behavioral, and even emotional level.

Little changes when those seeking to improve skip over learning. Any innovation, change, or improvement requires learning. Learning won't solve the daily challenges teams face; however, learning can give team members opportunities and possibilities they didn't previously have.

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Cycle of continuous improvement process

| Tasks | Evidence of completion |
|---|---|
| <p>Analyze multiple forms of student achievement data to identify areas of focus</p> | <p>SMART goals for student achievement for a 4-8 week period.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What do students need to know and do?</i> |
| <p>Identify educator learning goals</p> | <p>SMART goal for educators based on the student learning goals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What do teachers need to learn and do to help students achieve their learning goals?</i> |
| <p>Engage in professional learning</p> | <p>A plan for professional learning to accomplish goals; demonstration of completion of learning; plan for implementing the learning.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What did we learn; how will we implement our learning?</i> |
| <p>Implement the new learning with classroom- and school-based, job-embedded support</p> | <p>Student work from classrooms where new learning is implemented; teacher reflections on the application of the new learning; peer or coaching observation notes; principal observation notes; team meeting logs; lesson plans; revised lesson plans.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How did we integrate the new learning into our classroom practice and what support helped us with implementation?</i> |
| <p>Evaluate the professional learning</p> | <p>Student work or assessments that inform the evaluation of the effectiveness of the new learning, the degree of its implementation, and the quality of the results produced.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How did the professional learning affect our practice and student results?</i> |
| <p>Identify long-term improvements</p> | <p>Goals and benchmarks for ongoing implementation of the new learning and resulting student achievement.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What long-term actions will we commit to as a result of this cycle of continuous improvement and how will we monitor and measure these improvements?</i> |