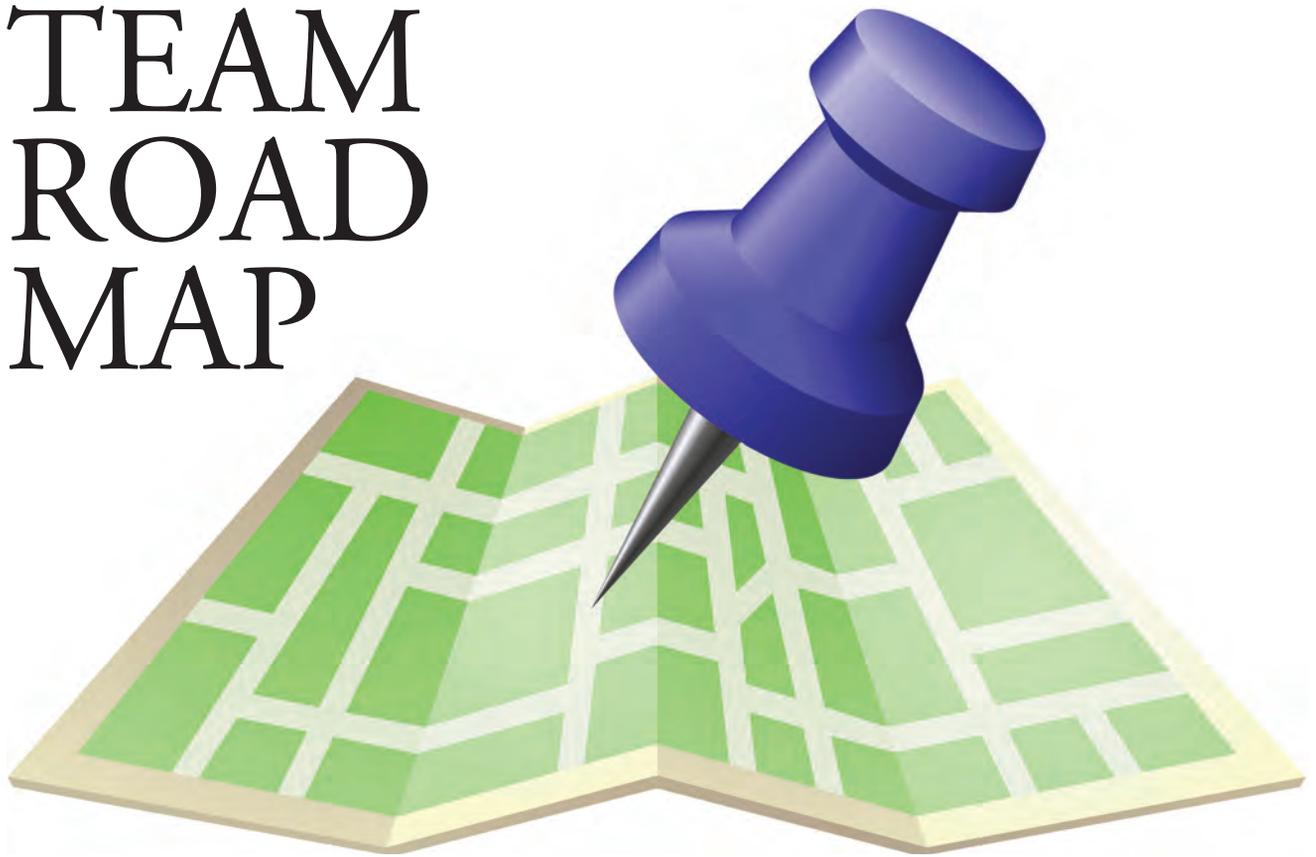


# CREATE *a* LEARNING TEAM ROAD MAP



## A WELL-DESIGNED PLAN IS FLEXIBLE AND FOCUSED ON THE TEAM'S GOAL

By Anne Jolly

**L**earning teams must take many steps in making their time together meaningful and productive. In addition to knowing who is meeting, what student needs they'll address, what norms they'll set for their work, how they'll find time, and how they'll evaluate their work, they also need to carefully plan the steps they'll take along the way. Otherwise, their meetings may be filled with fascinating activ-

ity and well-designed learning that doesn't accomplish the goals they've established.

Once teams know what they are setting out to accomplish through careful data analysis, their next step is to create a plan to guide their journey. Through this planning process, collaborative teams make clear their assumptions and beliefs about the work they're doing and keep their top priorities in mind.

Throughout the planning process, keep in mind that professional learning teams address student needs by focusing on increasing teachers' learning and expertise. Each

team will likely take a different path to reach its goal.

Consider this example of two schools that each chose a goal of increasing student reading comprehension across all content areas.

In one school, learning team members addressed the goal by increasing teachers' knowledge and use of research-based strategies to help struggling readers. Teams began by studying a book on effective strategies for increasing reading comprehension and applying the strategies across classes.

During the year, team members planned to work together to strengthen their use of promising strategies, to monitor results, and to compile a tool kit of reading practices that were effective with students.

An initial plan for a team in this school might include early milestones — desired accomplishments — such as increased teacher understanding of a reading strategy and use of that strategy in the classroom. Student milestones might include increased student success in using a strategy to understand written text. Milestones for the learning team might include productive use of team time, shared responsibilities, and participation from all members.

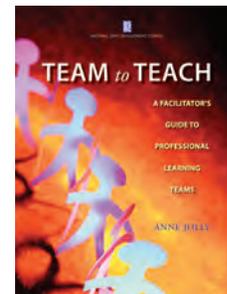
A team in this school might decide to study a book chapter, select a strategy to try in class, videotape a team member using that strategy, and analyze the videotape during a team meeting.

Initially, the team does not make yearlong plans. Members develop short-term plans with achievable milestones that help them feel successful in their first few meetings. As they continue to meet, they will see new possibilities and add activities and approaches to help students become stronger readers.

Faculty members at the second school also agreed on a goal of addressing students' needs in reading comprehension. In this school, teachers decided to let individual teams decide their own approach for reaching the goal.

Like the first school, some teams began by studying a book on research-based reading strategies and applying the strategies. Other teams planned to first determine student learning styles and then to study information on using

This article is adapted from *Team to Teach: A Facilitator's Guide to Professional Learning Teams* (NSDC, 2008). The book outlines the steps a learning team takes in its quest to improve the knowledge, skills, and practices of its members so they in turn are best equipped to reach and teach all students. The book is available through the Learning Forward Bookstore at <http://store.learningforward.org>.



learning styles to improve student reading.

One team planned to examine student work and develop quality reading assignments targeting areas where students needed more support. Still others planned to increase their skill at creating formative assessments to diagnose and develop solutions for students' reading difficulties. Each team spelled out specific, achievable milestones for teachers, students, and the learning team and decided on specific activities to accomplish these milestones.

These two schools are typical in their approaches to a common goal. In other schools, individual learning teams set their own goals. Each team within the school uses data to determine its own goal. Whichever approach a school uses, the teams' plans will reflect decisions teams make about organizing to reach their goal.

#### PREPARE TO DEVELOP A TEAM PLAN

The team plan is the beginning route that team members agree to follow to reach the team goal. The plan is a starting point for learning teams' work and also can help teachers get to know one another as professionals and build relationships.

Developing a good plan requires thoughtful reflection and discussion. Team members must spend time exploring ideas, examining different strategies for reaching the goal, and deliberating on which approaches they will use.

Sometimes teams shortcut this portion of the process, but avoiding planning hampers some team members' ability to contribute, limits teachers' opportunities to know one another at a deeper level, and results in team members feeling less committed to the team's work.

Reaching the goal requires that you guide teams in working together reflectively to develop a plan. Involve team members in discussions and interactions that will help them do the following:

**Discuss beliefs and assumptions.** The first step is to have teachers examine and discuss their underlying assumptions about students, teaching, and learning as related to the team's goal.

#### Team planning tools

Use the tools on pp. 35-37 to draft the team plan, outlining milestones and timelines to take the team where it needs to go. The team growth plan highlights specific indicators in 10 important areas for teams to keep track of how well their work and processes are progressing.

Everyone has unexamined assumptions about teaching and learning (see box at right). In fact, the practice of teaching is driven by underlying assumptions, values, and beliefs that have been passed down for decades.

For example, the practice of tracking students is rooted in the belief that students learn best when they are grouped with others of similar ability. If teachers use just one teaching style, such as a lecture approach, the underlying assumption is that all students learn in the same way.

Teaching can be unconsciously influenced by erroneous assumptions such as, “Some children are unable to learn because of poverty,” “Children of some races are smarter,” “Intelligence is fixed at birth,” or “Not all children can learn at higher levels.”

Verbalizing assumptions will help team members better understand one another and can lay the groundwork for more productive team dialogue. And when teachers become aware of assumptions driving their own teaching, they often are willing and even eager to learn new ways of instructing students.

**Examine current reality.** Teachers next need to look at what knowledge and experience they bring to the team; they will have opportunities throughout the year to share their skills. They then examine any gaps between their current knowledge and what they need to know to successfully reach the goal. With this information, they can begin to identify areas for research and study.

**Reflect on priorities and actions.** Now the team can begin to consider priorities and an initial time frame for the process. What must be accomplished first? What tasks and activities are teachers likely to need to do?

Team members should identify significant accomplishments or milestones to use to indicate progress in at least three areas: teacher learning, student learning, and team learning. Limit these initial milestones to no more than three in each area so teachers can reach the milestones, helping maintain their energy and enthusiasm. They may add milestones as they reach their early markers and gain deeper understanding about their work.

Teams also need to indicate in the plan what evidence members will collect to determine whether they are successfully moving toward their goal. Teams might plan to document periodic changes in:

- Teacher classroom practices;
- Student performance (classroom and standardized scores);
- Student attitudes and motivation;
- Teacher attitudes about working together; and
- Team functioning.

### DEVELOP AN INITIAL TEAM PLAN

After thoughtful reflection, teams are ready to begin writing the plan.

Writing a long-term plan at the beginning of the learning team process can be difficult because members may not understand the team’s work well enough to make informed decisions

### What do we believe?

Here are questions for teams to consider as they openly share assumptions about teaching as part of their planning process.

- What specific needs do our students have?
- What do we believe high-quality teaching in this area looks like? What would teachers and students be doing?
- What do our current instructional practices look like in this area?
- What do our current practices imply about how we believe our students learn?
- What beliefs about our students do we want our teaching to reflect?
- Is there a gap between what we believe about teaching and learning and what we actually do? If so, why?

about what they need to learn, what milestones to establish, and how to prioritize tasks.

Initial plans need to be general rather than detailed. Early plans should focus on short-term milestones. Don’t spend too much time and energy on a detailed, yearlong plan since the plan will evolve and change as teamwork gets underway.

If a team has difficulty beginning to map out a plan, teachers might need to expand their knowledge base about the team’s goal area. They might decide to read journal articles and books, observe other teachers, attend workshops, watch videos, or invite an expert in the goal area to work with them.

As teachers learn more about their goal area, they can revisit and complete the plan. Revisiting the plan frequently is a good idea, both to keep teams focused and to refine the plan as teachers’ knowledge and insight increase.

If a team stalls while designing a plan, help reignite members’ thinking by asking:

- What do you want students to be successful in doing by the end of the year?
- What do you want students to be able to do by the end of this quarter?
- What deeper understandings and improved instructional practices might you need to help students meet these milestones?
- What can you accomplish during your first few learning team meetings to begin to move you toward your goal?
- What activities will help you reach this goal?
- What relevant and reliable resources would help you accomplish your goal?

### A FINAL REMINDER ON TEAM PLANNING

Finally, keep in mind that teachers’ natural enthusiasm for students and their learning sometimes prompts team members

## Team long-term planning guide

**Directions:** After discussing, reflecting, and making notes, team members are ready to begin to develop a plan. This plan will likely change as the team continues to meet and learn together, so think in terms of a monthly plan until all feel ready to develop a long-term plan.

Decide as a team on milestones for the month, and then work together to determine activities, resources, and responsibilities to accomplish these milestones. Be certain that activities you select focus on teacher learning and growth.

**Team goal:** \_\_\_\_\_

### MILESTONES: WHAT WE PLAN TO ACHIEVE THIS MONTH THROUGH OUR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TEAM WORK.

Achievement area	Milestones/accomplishments (Keep realistic and achievable)	By when?
For students		
For teachers		
For our learning team		

### ACTIVITIES: WHAT WE PLAN TO DO TO HELP US ACHIEVE OUR MILESTONES AND MOVE TOWARD OUR GOAL.

Activity	Tasks to complete activity	Person(s) responsible

to make overly ambitious plans. When this happens, teachers may later feel overwhelmed and become discouraged when they aren't successful in reaching milestones. To maintain energy and confidence, teams should plan realistically and set short-term milestones that they can accomplish.

Remember that teams should continually re-evaluate their direction. Team members must be flexible, willing to reflect on their progress toward the goal, and willing to change course if

needed. There are many ways to reach a destination.

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## Plan for team growth

**Directions:** Begin now to plan for success as a productive team. Use this tool to track how well your team is modeling these 10 important characteristics. Discuss each characteristic together, and fill in the column at right. Complete a chart at regular intervals — monthly or quarterly.

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### TEAM GROWTH INDICATORS

### What might someone observing us see or hear that would indicate we're growing in this direction?

Maintain a focus on teacher professional growth.	
Abide by norms that guide team interactions and behaviors.	
Learn new and relevant information about teaching.	
Share leadership and responsibility.	
Communicate to others what we are learning and doing.	
Meet regularly and on schedule.	
Practice trusting behaviors.	
Work productively as a team.	
Apply new knowledge and skills in the classroom.	
Monitor student learning and success.	

**Source:** Jolly, A. (2008). *Team to teach: A facilitator's guide to professional learning teams*. Oxford, OH: NSDC.