



KEYS

to COLLABORATION



WHAT IT TAKES
TO MOVE
TOWARD
COLLECTIVE
RESPONSIBILITY



By Tracy Crow

Ask educators what they need for their own learning, and more time to collaborate with colleagues generally ranks high on the list. Educators know that when they encounter specific student learning or instructional challenges, their peers typically have insights and solutions that will be helpful. Every school has an enormous body of expertise, and educators need meaningful opportunities to tap that expertise every day.

Yet having professional learning communities on the schedule doesn't always fulfill teachers' collaboration needs. As the report *Teachers Know Best: Teachers' Views on Professional Development* demonstrated, having a team structure in place doesn't necessarily provide educators with the valuable collective learning they seek. Teachers surveyed weren't satisfied overall with their professional learning communities and, in focus groups, said that collaboration fell short of the ideal. While they could cite benefits of collaboration, they believed that agendas, protocols, and shared goals are essential (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014, pp. 5-8).

The Learning Communities standard in Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning highlights the essential elements of learning communities that contribute to improved educational practices and results for all students. In such communities, learners engage in a cycle of continuous improvement and share responsibility for all students. Their learning is aligned and coherent across teams, schools, and the system (Learning Forward, 2011, pp. 24-26).

So how can schools and systems create structures and supports so educators engage in the kinds of collaborative problem solving and intentional learning that they value?

What do lead learners need to consider? Here are several critical factors in supporting meaningful collaboration.

Time

When educators talk about their learning needs, they cite time as the resource they need to engage in collaborative learning. Without structures that provide time throughout the workweek, educators have no hope of participating in ongoing purposeful collaborative learning. Learning Forward's workbook *Establishing Time for Professional Learning* outlines a comprehensive process school and system leaders can use to create learning time (2013).

Many school systems are responding to this need for time by creating schedules that allow teams to meet regularly before, during, or after school. Unfortunately, many of those systems do so without communicating a clear plan for using the time effectively or providing the other resources and support that make meaningful collaboration possible. There is a danger in providing time without other supports. If both educators and community members see that professional learning time is wasted, they are not likely to support changed schedules for long, given that implementing such schedules can be difficult for a school system. Time is necessary but not sufficient.

Leadership

Principals and district administrators support collaborative learning when they ensure that all educators have the resources they require, including time. However, resources aren't enough. Learning teams benefit when school and system leaders engage as learners on the teams. Leader participation supports coherence and alignment across a school and a system. Also, when principals participate as learners on teams, they become more skillful instructional leaders, and,

most importantly, demonstrate the importance of continuous learning for all, a critical factor in creating learning cultures in schools.

Vision

Leaders also facilitate the creation of school and systemwide vision and goals for all learners, whether adults or students. When learners share a deep understanding of the vision and goals, they become clear about their role in helping to achieve the goals.

Alignment and accountability

Learning Forward's Learning Communities standard cites the importance of alignment among school and system goals along with policies and structures to support learning communities. Such alignment prevents fragmentation among learning communities. School and system leaders intentionally align learning communities vertically and across schools. When systemwide policies support and integrate learning communities, leaders can hold teams accountable for results.

Clear team goals

When educators understand specifically why they are meeting, they are more likely to benefit from collaboration. In a cycle of continuous improvement, teams examine many sources of data to pinpoint student learning needs and achievement gaps and go from there to determine their own learning needs. With a guiding vision in place, and a commitment systemwide and schoowide to alignment and coherence, each team is ready to establish and strive toward achieving specific goals for themselves and their students.

Facilitation support

While most teachers are eager to collaborate, they don't necessarily step into their first team meeting prepared to use the time effectively. Here's where skillful facilitation is essential. Educators in many roles can be capable facilitators — teachers, principals, department heads, instructional coaches — anyone who has had the opportunity develop the knowledge and skills to facilitate teams of adult learners. Facilitators help to structure time use, develop team norms and agendas, and use protocols for a wide range of purposes.

Collaboration skills

While skilled facilitators assist high-functioning teams in meeting their goals and using time wisely, each team member also needs opportunities to understand, practice, and apply a range of collaboration skills. They may build such understanding within or beyond their team learning time — wherever they have opportunities to learn foundational skills and practices in communication, decision making,

EFFECTIVE LEARNING DEFINED

Learning Forward's definition of professional learning describes effective, job-embedded, continuous, collaborative learning. The definition was created originally for use in federal policy during an earlier reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also referred to as the No Child Left Behind Act.

Since then, Learning Forward has used the definition to help not only policymakers but also educators and other stakeholders understand what effective professional learning looks like in practice when it is aligned with the Standards for Professional Learning.

As the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives continue to work on the reauthorization of ESEA, Learning Forward is again advocating the definition of professional learning in policy. To learn more about Learning Forward's definition and its role in policy, see www.learningforward.org/who-we-are/professional-learning-definition.

and conflict resolution, to name a few. As all team learners become more experienced, they develop deeper skills in collaboration and are able to share more equally in team leadership.

THE ULTIMATE GOAL

The ultimate goal of collaborative learning is better teaching, better student learning, better results for every learner in schools. Excellent teams — supported by committed leaders and sustained resources — create a culture where every professional in a school takes responsibility for every student.

REFERENCES

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (2014, December). *Teachers know best: Teachers' views on professional development*. Seattle, WA: Author. Available at www.teachersknowbest.org/reports.

Learning Forward. (2013). *Establishing time for professional learning*. Oxford, OH: Author. Available at www.learningforward.org/docs/default-source/commoncore/establishing-time-for-professional-learning.pdf.

Learning Forward. (2011). *Standards for Professional Learning*. Oxford, OH: Author.

•
Tracy Crow (tracy.crow@learningforward.org) is Learning Forward's director of communications. ■