THE BENEFITS OF
COLLABORATION

Because many school and system leaders and policymakers advocate and support teacher collaboration as a means to improve student achievement, it's important to understand how collaboration, teacher characteristics, and school characteristics interact to affect student achievement — and how the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) fit into this equation.

REFERENCES

Goddard, R., Goddard, Y., Kim, E.S., & Miller, R. (2015, August). A theoretical and empirical analysis of the roles of instructional leadership, teacher collaboration, and collective efficacy beliefs in support of student learning. *American Journal of Education, 121*(4), 501-530.

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

Ronfeldt, M., Farmer, S., McQueen, K., & Grissom, J. (2015). Teacher collaboration in instructional teams and student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal, 52*(3), 475-514.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES: Sustained teacher collaboration about instructional strategies, curriculum, students, and assessment is the primary vehicle for continuous improvement of teacher practice, sharing accountability, and collective responsibility.

LEADERSHIP: Teacher collaboration requires leaders who are able to cultivate the capacity to collaborate about instruction, curriculum, students, and assessments, create and support instructional teams to maintain engagement in high-quality collaboration, and serve as an advocate of teacher collaboration.

RESOURCES: Sustained teacher collaboration requires time, staff, and materials.

DATA: Districts that have invested in developing a data system that links educator and student data for multiple purposes have shown positive results (Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen, & Grissom, 2015).

LEARNING DESIGNS: Teacher collaboration is by its nature a powerful learning design. Teacher collaboration is grounded in the social interaction theory of learning and aligns with research on communities of practice, relevance to practice, and collective practice.

IMPLEMENTATION: This standard stresses sustained support, constructive feedback, and application of change research.

OUTCOMES: In the Ronfeldt study, teacher collaboration focused on teachers' core responsibilities — instruction, curriculum, assessment, and student success. It showed that teacher collaboration could be tied to both teacher and student improvement.

The Ronfeldt study concluded that "[s]tudent achievement gains are greater in schools with stronger collaborative environments and in classrooms of teachers who are stronger collaborators" (p. 512). Another study likewise concluded that "our results suggest that schools with greater levels of teacher collaboration did indeed have significantly higher levels of student achievement. Thus, not only is collaboration good for teachers — quite possibly by fostering teacher learning — but it is also positively related to student achievement" (Goddard, Goddard, Kim, & Miller, 2015).

WHAT ARE THE COMPONENTS OF A STRONG COLLABORATIVE ENVIRONMENT?

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 and questions to ask when addressing each.

1 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.
- Does our system's schedule allow teams to meet regularly before, during, or after school?
- Has our system communicated a plan to teachers about how to use time effectively?
- Have we provided all available resources and support to make meaningful collaboration possible in the time allowed?

2 VISION

When learners share a deep understanding of the vision and goals, they become clear about their role in helping to achieve the goals.
- Have our team or system leaders facilitated the creation of a school and systemwide vision and goals for all learners, whether adults or students?

3 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.
- Have our school and system leaders intentionally aligned learning communities vertically and across schools?
- Have we developed systemwide policies that support and integrate learning communities so that leaders can hold teams accountable for results?

4 CLEAR TEAM GOALS

When educators understand specifically why they are meeting, they are more likely to benefit from collaboration.
- Has our team examined many sources of data to pinpoint student learning needs and achievement gaps to better determine its own learning needs?
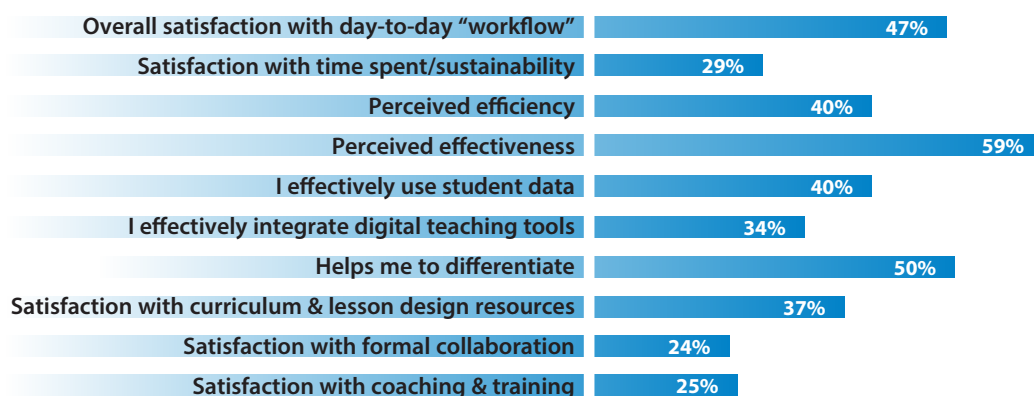
5 COLLABORATION SKILLS

Each team member needs opportunities to understand, practice, and apply a range of collaboration skills.
- How do we encourage team members to build such understanding within or beyond their team learning time — wherever they have opportunities to learn foundational skills and practices in communication, decision making, and conflict resolution?
- As all team learners develop deeper skills in collaboration, how do we encourage them to share more equally in team leadership?

WHERE STRONG COLLABORATION DOES EXIST, THE BENEFITS ARE SUBSTANTIAL

Teachers whose schools have strong collaboration report dramatically higher satisfaction with day-to-day work. Strong collaboration prepares teachers to face key challenges (e.g. use of data, technology, differentiation).

Benefit	Percent
Overall satisfaction with day-to-day "workflow"	47%
Satisfaction with time spent/sustainability	29%
Perceived efficiency	40%
Perceived effectiveness	59%
I effectively use student data	40%
I effectively integrate digital teaching tools	34%
Helps me to differentiate	50%
Satisfaction with curriculum & lesson design resources	37%
Satisfaction with formal collaboration	24%
Satisfaction with coaching & training	25%

Source: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (2015). *Teachers know best: Teachers' views on professional development.* Seattle, WA: Author.