



## Learning in name and practice

Working collaboratively with teams of professionals continues to be a practice embraced within our educational communities. This is an important trend that should continue. In fact, I've seen the benefits of this approach in practice.

Collaboration can take many forms. There are collaborative teams, communities of practice, learning communities, and learning teams. Regardless of which type of collaboration occurs in your environment, learning is the key element.

In practice, I've seen teams of teachers come together with a strong purpose and a strong desire to improve — but even they need a structure in place to achieve meaningful learning. Often these structures are put in place to help expedite and frame the experience. For example, professional learning communities expert Rick DuFour has created four questions for professional learning teams:

1. What is it we want our students to know?
2. How will we know if our students are learning?
3. How will we respond when students do not learn?
4. How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient? (DuFour & DuFour, 2012)

Sticking tightly to such a structure

**John Eyolfson is president of Learning Forward's board of trustees.**

### on board JOHN EYOLFSON

is essential to improving learning communities in a way that increases student achievement. However, there must be a conscious effort to acquire new knowledge, skills, and dispositions that ultimately change teaching practices in the classroom.

I say this from experience. I am working with a group of teachers passionate about improving student achievement by implementing brain-based strategies in their classrooms. During professional learning sessions, teachers reflected on their practices and identified areas of weakness they wanted to address.

One teacher — a science teacher at a local high school — wanted to see how using specific and strategic questioning strategies would help students engage with scientific concepts. He applied a technique found in David Sousa's book, *How the Brain Learns* (Corwin, 2011). At his invitation, I came into his classroom to collect evidence of the change in technique through video. He wanted to know if these techniques would make a difference.

Our district has invested in some relatively inexpensive equipment known as Swivl that will track a teacher wearing a special lanyard/microphone throughout the classroom. I spent a short time helping him frame his question as well as identifying

specific short-term outcomes before the taping. I spent about 15 minutes in his classroom operating the video equipment. After the lesson, he watched the video alone, then I followed up with a coaching conversation. He was able to use the video as evidence of how students were interacting with the concepts. He could also track which students were engaged and home in on the responses.

He asked his class about the effectiveness of the new questioning techniques. Even though he had been teaching 20-plus years, he felt obligated to improve his teaching and learning environment. He not only could identify what went well, he also was able to identify his next short-term outcome and goal.

The structure did its job. It brought teachers together in a meaningful way to work together. And for this teacher's students, it came down to three steps: He acquired new knowledge and skills, implemented these new practices into his classroom, and received meaningful feedback through video and a coaching conversation. Through structure and a desire to improve, the "learning" in our learning community was not only in name but also in practice.

#### REFERENCE

**DuFour, R. & DuFour, R.B. (2012).** *Essentials for principals: The school leader's guide to professional learning communities at work.* Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree. ■