



ASK

Frederick Brown

What can principals do to foster collaborative learning among teachers?

Q

As we look to encourage the habitual use of effective collaborative learning practices, what is the role of school leaders in creating cultures that nurture collaborative learning among teachers in their buildings? We understand that the principal is critical to implementing schoolwide shifts in how people learn and how they think about learning.

I agree completely that what the principal says and does will have great influence on whether, and how well, teachers collaborate in her or his school. There are several actions and elements for principals to prioritize if the goal is to create and support a culture for effective collaborative learning in schools.

Deeply understand and share the rationale for collaborative learning.

Principals will be in the best position to support and sustain collaborative learning cultures when they believe such learning is an effective pathway to success for all students in their schools. Learning Forward shares the research and rationale for collaborative learning through many of our resources, most notably the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) and also in our other books and this journal. Principals can educate themselves through these and other resources and may already have access to such information through learning within their districts.

Ideally, a vision for effective teaching and learning that includes collaborative professional learning is established at the district level, which means not only that the principal committed to a collaborative culture is

In each issue, we ask a learning professional to answer your professional learning questions. This month's response comes from Frederick Brown (frederick.brown@learningforward.org), Learning Forward deputy executive director.

aligned with district priorities, but also that he or she has access to support in these efforts.

The principal has the responsibility to make this vision clear and accessible to the rest of the school and may want to consider how much rationale and which resources will best support teachers in beginning, improving, or sustaining their work as collaborative learners.

Model what it means to be a collaborative learner.

School leaders demonstrate their expectation that collaborative learning will be the norm in their school when they themselves participate as learners in collaborative settings.

This may take many forms. They may participate as members of a learning team with other school and system leaders who meet to address their particular problems of practice.

When appropriate, the principal may also participate as a learner on teams within the school building. Such teams might include an instructional leadership team, where members represent different roles in the building and address schoolwide teaching and learning concerns.

Principals might also occasionally participate in teacher teams that meet around particular content area concerns, either to support the team in a facilitator or content expertise role or to monitor how to best support the team in other ways.

Principals' frequent and obvious participation in such learning teams highlights their authentic belief that collaboration among educators is important.

Create space and provide resources for collaboration.

Principals typically have the responsibility to establish the school's schedule, perhaps in collaboration or consultation with a school leadership team. The allocation of time to a task is the most visible demonstration of priorities that principals make. When teachers have time set aside explicitly for team learning, they understand its importance to principals.

Yet time alone is not enough to



support a team's learning. Teacher teams also need support in the form of knowledge, skills, and practices to effectively collaborate — they need to know how to do it. Principals can fulfill this need by ensuring teachers have opportunities to build their collaboration skill sets, whether through district-led opportunities, formal courses or webinars, or other learning resources. By the way, principals themselves need these skill sets and demonstrate their commitment to collaboration when they become more expert collaborators using similar learning opportunities.

Often teachers will need additional facilitation expertise on their teams to collaborate effectively, and principals may need to enlist facilitators from the district level or assign school-based coaches to facilitate teacher learning so teacher teams are positioned to achieve their intended results.

Principals continue to strengthen the notion that collaboration is the norm when they regularly amplify

learning teams by asking teams to share their work with their fellow teachers. They won't be doing this to evaluate the team's work but rather to confirm collaboration's importance in how the school operates.

The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015) include Standard 7: Professional Community for Teachers and Staff, which states: "Effective educational leaders foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student's academic success and well-being." I'd urge educators to read the complete standard for additional ideas.

For the past five years, I have worked with Fort Wayne Community Schools in Indiana, and that experience has helped me see that, in a true learning system, leaders at all levels put learning first. What that looks like on the ground is leaders committed to their own improvement,

superintendents making sure that their central office leaders engage in learning and provide learning for principals, and principals taking responsibility for both their learning and the teacher learning in schools.

This learning is visible, its results are celebrated, and learning is not optional. That's how cultures shift, and everyone employed by that system knows that collaboration is the way work is done every day.

References

- Learning Forward. (2011).** *Standards for Professional Learning*. Oxford, OH: Author.
- National Policy Board for Educational Administration. (2015).** *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015*. Reston, VA: Author. Available at www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Professional-Standards-for-Educational-Leaders-2015.pdf. ■