



GROWING OPPORTUNITIES

COLLABORATION NURTURES AND SUPPORTS
EARLY LEARNING EDUCATORS

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How can teachers move from working in isolation within ineffective systems to building thriving, collaborative teaching environments in which they are supported and inspired to work with their colleagues in communities focused on mutual professional growth?

In our work as early learning instructional coaches, we have witnessed the ways professional learning cultures can be nurtured with intentional strategies to develop community, support reflective practices, and accelerate teachers' collective professional growth.

Here, we share the real-life experiences of three communities of early learning professionals who have achieved just that. Their stories demonstrate how educators can create and sustain a culture of continuous professional growth and collaboration that results in access to high-quality education for every student.

At some point in our careers as educators, most of us have worked in a school where we didn't feel safe and supported. Many of us have been expected to teach a one-dimensional, cookie-cutter curriculum that we knew didn't reflect the intrinsic interests or individual needs of our students.

And more than a few of us have worked in systems that have not provided protected time to reflect on and assess our students' work and progress, making it difficult to accurately adjust our instruction to meet the specific learning needs of our children.

Without the time, resources, and valued space to learn and grow professionally, it is no wonder that so many educators feel unsupported and sometimes uninspired.

That these challenges are particularly evident in the early learning context where some teaching staff are still striving to be seen as professional educators is especially concerning. Despite growing evidence of — and national attention to — the critical importance of early childhood education, the working conditions and professional learning structures in place for the teachers of 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds are years behind what is now often commonplace in the K-12 space.

Professional development available to most early learning teachers is extremely limited. What is offered is too often focused on issues of compliance instead of capacity building and integrates minimal, if any, opportunities for professional collaboration and planning. The implicit message is that early learning teachers need to figure

it out on their own and that they are expected to plan and collaborate on their own unpaid time after the workday has ended or on weekends.

Despite — or maybe in response to — this, many early learning teachers are finding ways to come together and ask: How do we transform our school systems into inspiring, collaborative teaching and learning environments for ourselves and our students?

● **PRE-K CLASSROOM TEAM
LEARNING COMMUNITY**

KAYTIE BRISSENDEN-SMITH,
pre-K coach

When I first met the preschool teaching team at a child development center in East Palo Alto, California, they were not



**Kaytie
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working together or communicating regularly, despite their best intentions.

The team, which consisted of a lead teacher, two assistant teachers, and one paraeducator, had undergone many

changes in a short amount of time, including a new site director, adoption

of a new curriculum, and the addition of a new member.

As their coach, I would walk in and see four people working independently of one another, sometimes even giving children opposing directions. While there was a lesson plan in place, no one seemed to understand his or her role in its delivery. As a result, the children were not engaged regularly, nor did they know what to expect of their teachers or the environment, and their uncertainty was reflected in their language and behavior.

To tackle these challenges, I felt it was important to connect not only to each team member's individual goals but also to determine overall team goals. I prompted group members to ask themselves what kind of learning experience they wanted to be able to provide their students and what was needed from each team member to achieve this.

While it was evident that each teacher wanted to provide the best possible learning experience for the children, it was also clear that they did not have a shared vision of how they could achieve this.

To create this vision, the team began having regular team meetings to plan lessons collaboratively. Next, they explored how to address the individual needs of each child and articulated roles for each team member in meeting these needs. The regular meeting structure helped team members hold each other accountable and encourage one other to follow through.

Meeting regularly and with purpose clarified team members' commitment to each other and their students, opening lines of communication, determining clear expectations, and providing consistency.

With individual coaching and professional development, the team now engages in common goal-setting, intentional planning, and regular

coaching cycles. As a result, formative assessment data including observations of children's actions and language show that children understand the rules and expectations of the classroom, demonstrate increased empathy to one another, and are engaged in all aspects of classroom learning.

Key takeaways:

A first step is bringing people together and opening up lines of communication.

The teachers first identified their needs, then set learning targets and outcomes based on those needs to launch and then guide ongoing collaborative meetings to pursue shared professional goals.

● PRE-K TEACHER LEADER COHORT

ANA MORENO,

pre-K coach and teacher leader facilitator

As a prekindergarten instructional coach, I facilitate a group of preschool teachers in Oakland (California) Unified School District as



Ana Moreno

they work together to build teacher leadership capacity.

For the past few years, these teacher leaders have been meeting once a month to reflect and collaborate.

They are supported by the Oakland Early Childhood Administration, which ensures this team has the necessary compensation, materials, and work time.

We began the collaboration process with teacher leaders reflecting on their needs, interests, and passions to drive the work of our professional learning community. This is aligned with adult

learning theory, which suggests that adults learn best when their learning closely connects with their needs.

Teacher leaders also surveyed all early childhood education teachers to identify needs districtwide. The data indicated two areas of focus: building support for new preschool teachers to help them navigate their first year in the district, and gathering videos and articles that showcase the importance of play-based learning and highlight ways to integrate play into everyday classroom activities. The team used this information to initiate two projects to support teacher onboarding and instructional practices that incorporate play.

The team also developed a structure for teacher leader meetings that includes discussion protocols to support team-building activities and sharing best practices. Teacher leaders reported they left meetings feeling inspired with new ideas and a renewed commitment to support their colleagues.

Discussion protocols helped team members actively listen and ask reflective questions as they explored and problem-solved around classroom challenges. The protocols also guided the exploration of possible next steps. Overall, teachers said, meeting protocols helped build a greater sense of a community.

Meetings also became a forum for presenting and sharing concrete instructional ideas. For example, at one meeting, one prekindergarten teacher gave a presentation that explored how using "loose parts" to facilitate play can help manage challenging behaviors in the classroom. "Loose parts" are simple materials that foster creativity and self-directed play as children manipulate the materials with minimal guidance.

As a result, several colleagues experimented with "loose parts," returning to the next meeting with their implementation stories and suggestions.

Similar to classroom instruction for students, professional learning that is relevant and responsive to the needs of teachers inspires meaningful learning and growth.

Key takeaways

District support was key, providing compensation, resources, and protected work time.

Teachers focused very thoughtfully on specific, articulated issues identified by teachers, providing resources directly aligned with those expressed needs and authentic problems of classroom teaching practice.

● TRANSITIONAL KINDERGARTEN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

JENNA WACHTEL,
transitional kindergarten coach

Sophia Jimenez and Sal Germano teach transitional kindergarten, a newer grade in California that serves children who turn 5 between September 2 and December 2.



Jenna Wachtel

Although experienced teachers, they were overwhelmed and unsure of what to do. As the only two transitional kindergarten teachers in their pre-K-8 school district, they turned to each other to help unpack what this new grade meant and how to best support their young students.

As their instructional coach, after hearing their concerns, I worked with them to create a professional learning community to support their learning needs and engage in continuous collective learning and development. We met in August before the year began for a week of planning and met twice a month thereafter for two hours



Sophia Jimenez and Sal Germano

each month, once during contract time and once outside of contract time.

We developed a regular agenda structure that would allow Jimenez and Germano to tackle what we identified as their three biggest needs: engaging in developmentally appropriate observation and assessment, planning thematic instruction, and nurturing quality family engagement.

Throughout the first year, I facilitated the collaborative meetings and Jimenez and Germano brought in artifacts of their practice, such as videos and student work samples, for analysis. They also identified and discussed articles to help answer their questions and created thematic unit plans together.

During one particular meeting, as Jimenez shared her assessment and observation process, Germano said, “I don’t really get what you’re explaining. I think I need to see it to understand.” They requested released time to allow them to observe each other, which added a whole new layer to their system of support and collaboration.

At the end of the first year, Jimenez and Germano met during their break to reflect and plan for year two. Now that they had a better sense of some of the foundational pieces of transitional kindergarten, they determined that their highest need as teachers was to learn more about strategies to support the social and emotional development of their young students.

We researched various learning

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opportunities and proposed a learning plan for their second year of collaboration. They requested that the district pay for them to attend a professional development series aligned to their year two goals instead of district offerings focused on topics less relevant to transitional kindergarten. After some negotiating, the district accepted the teachers’ proposal, and we began the next phase of collaboration, with the teachers moving into a more facilitative role in their own learning.

Key takeaways

During regular meetings that featured goal-setting, a targeted agenda, and facilitation, the teachers shared artifacts and analyzed student work, reviewed research in alignment with their learning needs and questions, and planned together. When they added another level of collaboration — observing each other’s classrooms — they deepened their engagement, understanding, and support for each other. They were then able to, as a team, develop highly refined year two goals and a professional learning plan to go with it. Over time, they began to own the process, depending less and less on the coach for facilitation.

STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Each of these examples demonstrates potential starting points for the development of a culture of collaboration and curiosity that connects teachers within and across classrooms and school sites in any community. Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) serve as the foundation.

First and foremost, each example highlights the power of a **learning community** of educators coming together to meet their own, authentic needs. The content of the collaboration evolves as the needs of the students and teachers — as identified by the participants in the group, using a range of **data** — evolve.

Each group began by assessing and determining its shared needs and created **learning designs** to focus time and resources to meet those learning needs. District and site **leadership** supported

the culture of professional learning both logistically, by protecting time within contract hours or offering compensation for meeting outside of school time, and in practice, by allowing space for teacher leadership as responsibility for facilitation moved from the coach to the teachers themselves.

As a result of these intentional moves, the **outcomes** of professional collaboration were immediately applicable for **implementation** in classrooms with positive learning outcomes for students.

LEARNING TIED TO TEACHERS’ NEEDS

We are learning that a culture of continuous professional learning grows from a shared vision and focus on teacher empowerment and agency to build teachers’ own expertise in alignment with their real needs and goals. Just as students learn best when exploring topics tied to their interests, when early learning teachers engage

in ongoing learning that is driven by their context, an inspiring culture of collaboration and commitment to more equitable student outcomes for our youngest learners emerges.

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