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WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

Maria Fenwick and Kat Johnston

CO-LABS DRAW ON EDUCATORS' PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

On a Wednesday night in February, a group of teachers gathered in the Kendall Square area of Cambridge, Massachusetts — an international hub of high-tech innovation — to engage in some innovative work of their own.

They included a kindergarten teacher from the Boston Public Schools, a middle school Spanish teacher from a nearby charter school, and a high school history teacher from a more affluent suburb. Their career experience ranged from relatively new teachers to seasoned veterans. What they had in common was a desire to learn from one another and to problem-solve around particular challenges related to cultural competency in their classrooms.

The teachers are participating in Co-Labs for Innovation, one of the core programs of the Boston-based Teacher Collaborative. Co-labs bring together educators from different schools and communities, across grade levels and subject areas, to focus on a common area of professional challenge.

Over a 12-week period, the small cohort of educators meets weekly to engage in an inquiry cycle model that allows them to explore and ultimately solve the “pebble in my shoe” type of challenges that typical professional development doesn’t touch.

HOW IT BEGAN

The Teacher Collaborative was founded on the premise that teachers are natural problem-solvers and that teachers solve problems better together. In 2017, we founded the organization to build space for Massachusetts educators (from district, charter, and independent schools alike) to connect, share, and ultimately, feel part of a supportive profession that lifts up all students, regardless of whose classroom they sit in.

The Teacher Collaborative emerged from more than a year of listening to teachers in surveys, focus groups, and coffee shop conversations. We heard time and again from teachers in all grades, settings, and career stages that they were hungry for a different kind of professional development designed *by* teachers, *with* teachers, *for* teachers.

The co-lab model provides teachers opportunities to engage with one another, and what happens when they do is simple but powerful. They are able to break down barriers and share new perspectives. They share successes that might otherwise have traveled no farther than their classroom doors, or possibly down the hallway of their building. They also coalesce quickly on what’s common: the care they have for their students, the conscientiousness with which they approach their work, and their constant quest to improve.

Co-labs include a mix of virtual and in-person sessions that take place in the evening over



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dinner. Each session is facilitated by a lead facilitator (one of us) and a supporting facilitator. The program is grant-funded, so there is no cost to participants. The Teacher Collaborative also covers small purchases of classroom materials and supplies to help teachers implement solutions to their problems of practice.

Teacher Collaborative crowdsources our community of educators to determine co-lab topics. The first few cohorts of co-labs have centered around such topics as innovative classroom design, effective parent engagement, and mindfulness for educators.

Beyond a deep focus on the content of the co-lab, participants also get steeped in improvement science and design thinking principles. We spend time unpacking the concepts of success and failure in an effort to normalize the everyday experiences of teachers, no matter their years of experience, or what or whom they teach.

Our model resists the temptation to jump right to solutions. For the first three sessions, participants focus solely on understanding the problem, examining data, consulting research, and simply exploring why a particular challenge persists.

“Taking the time to ask questions and explore the problem was, by far, the most profound part of the process for me,” said one participant. “That is usually rushed through and brushed aside, and I felt that the time devoted to untangling our challenge was not only incredibly valuable to me, but will be something that I adapt to use with children in my classroom.”

Co-labs emphasize that success is not a straight line, and educators embrace this mantra as a prerequisite for their ability to innovate. We also capitalize on small, quick actions that allow teachers to make a change, collect data on its impact, learn from it, and share it with the team.

PROMISING OUTCOMES

Preliminary feedback data shows promising outcomes. Participants

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universally report that the experience helps them create and sustain real change in their practice. When asked whether they agreed with the statement, “Compared to other professional development I’ve participated in this school year, the co-lab was a more valuable professional learning experience,” 100% of participants either agreed (20%) or strongly agreed (80%).

Educators who enroll in a co-lab consistently note how rare it is to find opportunities to learn and problem-solve with colleagues from other schools. Said one participant, “It’s so nice just to talk about teaching for hours — not grading, not schedules, not where kids are, not logistics, just math teaching. I feel like I never get to think about my teaching anymore because school is always so busy, so it is really refreshing to be able to do that in the co-lab.”

Another said, “I’m constantly craving this level of reflective practice: getting specific and purposeful about the challenge I am facing.”

We’re still learning about the longer-term benefits of the co-lab experience for teachers, but we have uncovered some best practices in how to create cross-school collaboration opportunities. These are:

- **Provide opportunities to build trust early and often:** Co-labs include a mix of in-person and virtual meetings, but we front-load the in-person meetings, since they allow the group to gel more quickly.
- **Emphasize common ground:** We design activities within meetings that are designed to surface what’s common. Why

does this challenge matter to individual group members? What are the common traits that bring teachers into the profession and keep them there?

- **Capitalize on differences:** Too often, school-based inquiry groups can feel like echo chambers, with teachers often limited by the shared experiences in that particular building. Cross-school collaboration opens the door to new perspectives and approaches. Often, slight tweaks based on the recommendation of another teacher are enough to unlock a new line of thinking.
- **Allow for individualized adult learning, just like we do for students:** This is a principle teachers know well when it comes to teaching children, but often gets left behind in adult learning environments. Collaborative opportunities can still be individualized.
- **Offer strong support and accountability:** 100% of co-lab participants report that the ongoing follow-up they received from us and from peers in the group was essential for helping them get from challenge to solution.

The co-lab model works because teachers tap into their own experience and expertise to problem-solve together, and we know that such opportunities for collaboration are few and far between. In fact, we’re always learning from teachers, too, because their feedback enables us to continue tweaking and strengthening the model.

We’re encouraged that the Teacher Collaborative is beginning to make an impact in Massachusetts, and we’re hopeful that teachers across the country will find similar opportunities to overcome pervasive isolation and reinvent outdated professional norms of teaching. ■