

'Collaboration lite' puts student achievement on a starvation diet

In my previous column, I argued that 1) a professional is obligated to seek and apply best practice when serving clients; 2) it is evident that the best practice for meeting the needs of students and improving professional practice in schools is to build a collaborative culture; and 3) educational leaders should, therefore, focus their improvement efforts on building a collaborative culture in their districts and schools.

Calls for a collaborative culture come from leading educational researchers who use unusually emphatic language. Milbrey McLaughlin and Joan Talbert (2001) found that effective high schools and effective departments within high schools were characterized by powerful professional collaboration. Kenneth Eastwood and Karen Seashore Louis (1992) concluded that creating a collaborative environment featuring cooperative problem solving was the single most important factor in successful school restructuring. Fred Newmann and Gary Wehlage (1995) found that nurturing a professional collaborative culture was one of the most significant factors in successful school improvement efforts. Judith Warren Little (1990) advised that effective collaboration between teachers was linked to gains in student achievement, higher quality solutions to problems, increased self-efficacy among all staff, more systematic assistance to beginning teachers, and an expanded pool of ideas, methods, and materials that benefited all teachers.

But what is collaboration? Although school and district leaders acknowledge the benefits of a collaborative culture, they often have different ideas about what constitutes collaboration. Many equate collaboration with congeniality. They point to the camaraderie of the group — the secret Santa exchanges, recognition of birthdays, Friday afternoon social gatherings — as evidence of a collaborative culture.

Other leaders believe they are building a collaborative culture when they engage staff in developing consistent operational guidelines and procedures. They attempt to build consensus on how teachers respond to routine issues

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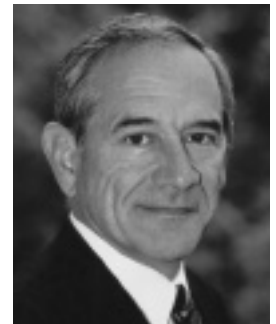
such as tardiness, students failing to complete homework, the supervision rotation for recess, whether the school permits classroom parties, and so on.

Some leaders cite teachers' willingness to work together to create schoolwide programs and events as evidence of a collaborative culture. They contend, correctly, that staff must demonstrate high levels of cooperation to plan and execute the annual school picnic, science fair, or career day. Elementary principals may point to how well their teachers work together to build a schedule that allows students to move from one classroom to another for instruction in specific content. Many leaders organize the staff into committees to oversee school operations — discipline, technology, social, community involvement, etc.

All the initiatives and projects described have, at one time or another, been offered as examples of a school's commitment to collaboration. All of the activities can be worthwhile. Although there is little evidence that teacher congeniality and social interactions impact student achievement (Marzano, 2003), life is certainly more pleasant if we enjoy the company of those with whom we work. Including the staff in decisions about school procedures is generally preferable to unilateral decrees from the principal. Special schoolwide events can enrich students' experience. Coordinated teacher schedules can allow teachers to capitalize on individual strengths in meeting students' needs. Schoolwide committees can encourage all staff to take an interest in the school beyond their classrooms and expand leadership opportunities. I am not criticizing any of these practices. However, none of these can transform a school.

Leaders determined to impact student achievement must not settle for congeniality, coordination, delegating responsibilities, or any form of "collaboration lite." They must promote a collaborative culture by defining collaboration in narrow terms: the systematic process in which we work together to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve our individual and collective results.

The first key term in this definition is systematic. Teachers are not invited or encouraged to collaborate. Collaboration is embedded in the routine practices of the school. Teachers are organized into teams and provided time to meet during the school day. They are provided specific guidelines and asked to engage in specific activities that help them focus on student achievement. Teams



In each issue of *JSD*, Rick DuFour writes about effective leadership. His columns can be found at www.nsdc.org/library/dufour.html.

True collaboration does not happen by chance or by invitation. It happens only when leaders commit to creating the systems that embed collaboration in the routine practices of the school and when they provide teachers and teams with the information and support essential to improve practice.

center dialogue around three critical questions:

- What is it we want our students to learn?
- How will we know when each student has learned it?
- How can we improve on current levels of student achievement?

None of this happens by chance. School leaders develop procedures to ensure all staff work together to focus constantly on those key questions.

Second, the process is designed to impact professional practice. Staff members do more than analyze, reflect, discuss, or debate. They use collaboration as a catalyst to change their practices. They continuously look for more effective ways to help all students learn.

Third, the effectiveness of the collaborative process is assessed on results rather than perceptions, projects, or positive intentions. Teams identify and pursue specific, measurable, results-oriented goals and look for evidence of student achievement as the barometer of their success. They shift the focus from teacher inputs (for example, whether teachers accomplished their goal of creating a new unit or implementing a new strategy) to student outcomes — evidence that students are learning at higher levels.

Leaders foster powerful professional collaboration when they engage teams of teachers in 1) clarifying the essential knowledge and skills of a particular grade level, course, or unit of instruction; 2) developing common assessments of student learning; 3) analyzing results to identify areas of strength and weakness for both individual teachers and the team; and 4) establishing specific goals and action plans to improve student achievement.

Schools cannot achieve the systematic, results-oriented collaboration that impacts teacher practice unless teachers have both comparative student achievement data and collegial support.

Teachers may work together to identify common outcomes and develop common assessments. If, however, each teacher has access only to the results of his or her students, without any comparison to other students in the school, team members will not be able to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of their

individual instruction.

There is a big push for schools to be more data-driven these days, but simply providing data to schools and teachers does not translate into improved practice. Even teachers who work in isolation can bury themselves in data. For every assessment a teacher administers, he or she can establish the mean, median, mode, range, percentage of As, percentage of Fs, standard deviations, and a host of other statistical facts for the test in general and for specific skills within the test. But unless teachers have a valid basis for comparison, they are denied insight into what they have done well and what areas are most in need of improvement.

Teachers who have the benefit of this useful information on a frequent, timely basis, along with support from a collaborative team, describe the process as energizing. But true collaboration does not happen by chance or by invitation. It happens only when leaders commit to creating the systems that embed collaboration in the routine practices of the school and when they provide teachers and teams with the information and support essential to improve practice.

Effective school leaders will not settle for what is now passing for collaboration in many schools. They will, instead, work with staff to create a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and impact professional practice to improve their individual and collective results.

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