Welcome to this special all-digital Summer 2019 issue of Educational Leadership!

If you are new to Educational Leadership (EL), let us introduce you…

This issue is a bonus, ninth issue for all our members, and a free preview issue for prospective readers. New readers who join ASCD by August 14, 2019, will receive the September 2019 issue of EL, all about “What New Teachers Need,” plus eight more issues in 2019–20.

What Do Readers Like about EL?

“EL is always colorful and inviting. The articles are perfect to put out to teachers without being daunting. It is a beautiful balance of meeting teachers and school leaders where we are without overwhelming us with statistical data.”

“I like the current topics of interest. Recognized experts and practicing educators are contributors. Using themes to structure the magazine means I can easily locate articles later.”

“Coherence. Well-written and well-researched but with an engaging (informal) tone.”

“EL is considered the gold standard in current issues/hot topics related to instruction, curriculum, and supervision.”

“Sometimes you are ahead of us. Many times you reinforce our initiatives with research and expertise. You help me lead.”

—Quotes from the EL Readers Survey conducted by Readex

You can also read EL in the free EL app, available in iTunes, Google Play, and the Amazon Appstore.

Happy summer, and we hope you enjoy reading about High-Powered Teams.

See you back in print and online in September.

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Cover: Antti Metsaranta / Shutterstock. Illustration enhanced by Donald Ely.
Coming This Fall: What New Teachers Need

What do new teachers really need to know and do to survive and thrive? Our September 2019 issue will look at the craft and calling of teaching, providing strategic advice (and moral support) to new teachers and those who support them. Featured authors include Mike Schmoker, Todd Whitaker, Sarah Fiarman, Robert Jackson, and Paul Emerich France. Don’t miss this essential back-to-school resource.

To purchase back issues of EL, go to www.ascd.org/elbackissues.

Readers React

April 2019

An Issue Well-Read

There are so many perks to being a member of ASCD, but this month’s EL magazine [“Race in America’s Schools”]...WOW! So many great articles. Paul Gorski’s “Avoiding Racial Equity Detours” is a must-read. Thank you!  

Paul Forbes (@PaulForbesNYC)

I’ve been a proud @ELmagazine subscriber and reader for 11 years. Hands down, the April 2019 Edition #separateandstillunequal is THE BEST cover-to-cover edition I’ve received and read.  

Abby Boruff (@TrailblzingAbby)

Let’s Hear It for the Teachers

This is fantastic! I am thrilled to see Matthew Kay’s message [“Shock Value’ Is Overrated in Race Conversations”] getting out there as widely as possible. Plus, I love it when EL magazine publishes classroom teachers!

Jennifer Orr (@jenorr)

Too Much Focus on Race?

I’ve been teaching in both private and public schools for nearly 30 years. All of this information seems well-intended, but has it dawned on anyone at ASCD that maybe the way we educators have been doing things since Brown vs. Board of Education may not be working? I’m referring to the constant focus on race. Maybe we should all just start looking at each other as human beings, and if we are going to judge, do so on the content of one another’s character, not on the color of our skin. I hope that sounds familiar to ASCD, but I fear it is ignored for a more politically charged narrative of race, race, race. This overworked narrative is only propagating more division in our country, and it is especially unfair to marginalized communities.

Mike Scallon, science and robotics teacher, St. Gabriel’s Catholic School, Austin, Texas

March 2019

Welcome to the Fold

Super excited to dig into my first issue of Educational Leadership. So many great articles in one issue—including one by Jacy Ippolito and Douglas Fisher [“Instructional Leadership for Disciplinary Literacy”]. I read a few of the articles online and decided I just needed to own the issue...and get a membership!

Jill Tully (@jillrt)

February 2019

Tech-Savvy Praise

As a subscriber to Educational Leadership for probably the better part of 15 to 20 years, I find that some issues have some interesting articles, and others are not really pertinent to my position. I have never been previously moved to tell you that any issue was great, controversial, not useful etc., but the Tech-Savvy School issue is outstanding!

Randee Susan Blair, coordinator of school services and professional development, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois

Love (or dislike) something in a recent issue of EL? We want to hear about it! Write to us at edleadership@ascd.org or on Twitter @ELmagazine. Printed reactions may be edited for clarity and length.
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Schools in the U.S. have often been said to have an egg-crate culture, with teachers isolated in their separate classrooms. But that’s been changing in recent years. Professional learning communities, once a novelty, are now commonplace. Cross-department task forces and leadership teams proliferate. The value of teacher collaboration is now widely acknowledged. Yet there’s also a growing sense—backed by some hard evidence—that these various efforts to bring educators together haven’t been as impactful (or as rewarding) as hoped. A survey conducted for the Gates Foundation a few years ago, to take one example, found that teachers weren’t particularly keen on their PLC experiences.

It’s almost as if educators, coming out of their egg crates, have been discovering what the rest of the workforce already knew: Without the right structure and sense of purpose, team projects can be a drag.

This special digital issue of Educational Leadership takes a closer look at this problem and offers ideas and solutions to help educators regain and build on the potential of teamwork in schools. A central message is that just bringing people together, no matter how noble or urgent the purpose, or how long-standing the format, is not enough. Effective group work takes ongoing deliberation and care. As you explore this issue, you might ask yourself: How can my school be more intentional in planning and structuring teams and meetings?

The authors presented here offer plenty of helpful suggestions. Kathryn Parker Boudett and Meghan Lockwood discuss the importance of establishing norms for meetings so that teams have clear expectations for how they will work together and avoid “inequitable patterns” of communication. Allison Rodman and Jill Thompson, meanwhile, identify the common ways, through inertia or lack of focus, that school teams often sabotage their own work. (“Failing to follow through” sound familiar to anyone?)

Other articles, like Jason Stricker’s on instructional leadership teams and principal Jesse Kraft’s on teacher grade-level meetings, delve into the structure and dynamics of effective group work. These pieces may prompt you to re-examine your meeting agenda formats and facilitation protocols. Are your school’s teams, as Kraft discovered, creating more work in meetings than they are accomplishing?

Collaborating for Change

In reflecting on ways to be more intentional about teamwork, you might also consider the role of collective efficacy, now widely viewed as a major driver of change in schools. A pair of articles in this issue, one by Jenni Donohoo and Steven Katz and another by former principal Peter DeWitt, examine the interconnecting factors involved in getting to this productive dynamic, which happens when teams of teachers gain the confidence that they can change the trajectory of student learning. How might educators in your school be given authentic opportunities to “take charge of an element of teaching and learning and see the difference they can making through working together”?

Of course, if team-based approaches in U.S. schools haven’t yet lived up to their promise, there may be larger structural issues in play as well. As Marc Tucker explains in his article, school systems in other countries give educators far more time and support (and autonomy) for collaborative planning and problem solving. And as Megan Power notes in her piece on a newly opened, design thinking-based school, traditional school structures—from master schedules to building layouts—aren’t necessarily conducive to intensive teamwork.

Such observations, we hope, will spark conversation and reflection on the organization and purpose of schools in the 21st century. What should change? How can schools better support educators as knowledge workers who learn from each other and whose professional development is “woven into the job itself”? How might you and your colleagues nudge the process along in your school system?
Schools that structure teachers’ schedules in ways that give them more time for collaboration share several key characteristics, according to a study from the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education. The study, “Teachers’ Time: Collaborating for Learning, Teaching, and Leading,” looks at four schools (ranging from K–4th grade to high school) known for giving teachers significant time to work together. Despite differences in context and geography, the researchers found, the schools had a number of organizational and philosophical traits in common. These included:

**Scheduling for learning.** All the schools arranged their master schedules in nontraditional ways, orienting them around clear student learning goals and the support and time teachers needed to help their students reach those goals.

**Coherent instructional philosophy.** Teachers at the schools had shared pedagogical approaches and a clear conception of the purpose of their collaborative-planning work.

**Shared governance.** All the schools had structures in which teachers played a valued role in decision making.

**Teacher leadership.** Teachers at the schools had multiple and flexible roles beyond their classrooms, including as mentors, professional development facilitators, and curriculum specialists.

**Continual evolution.** The schools’ schedules were not fixed but were continually being refined to address teachers’ needs and other contingencies.

According to the study, research shows that high-quality teacher collaborative work has the potential to boost teacher self-efficacy and student learning. Yet “few schools structure teacher time in ways that create opportunities for teachers to learn from each other during the school day.” The four schools studied “exemplify the exception to the rule”—but show that, when certain conditions are in place, such work can be done.

—Anthony Rebora
Effective leaders “eat last”—sacrificing their own needs for the good of those they lead. In this way, they cultivate an organizational culture that values teamwork over individual achievement. The best leaders, Simon Sinek writes, create a “circle of safety” that extends to the “outermost edges of an organization,” nurturing a sense of safety and belonging and insulating team members from outside threats.

In such organizations where trust reigns, innovation and productivity flourish.

That’s the gist of *Leaders Eat Last*, Simon Sinek’s much-cited book on the qualities of high-performing leaders. First published in 2014, the book has been relaunched with a revised and expanded chapter on leading Millennials.

That’s the gist of *Leaders Eat Last*, Simon Sinek’s much-cited book on the qualities of high-performing leaders. First published in 2014, the book has been relaunched with a revised and expanded chapter on leading Millennials. Born between the early 1980s and early 2000s, Millennials (or Gen Y) have long confounded the Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers who tend to supervise them.

Sinek reports that Millennials often have an insatiable appetite for feedback (though not criticism), a tendency toward boredom and impatience, tech addiction, and a sense of entitlement. But as he points out, these young adults have unique strengths—they are socially conscious, inclusive and open-minded, and remarkably tech-savvy.

Leaders must seek ways to tap into these positive attributes and attend to areas of weakness. Sinek’s strategies to help Millennials grow—and strengthen teams—include banning phones from conference rooms and meetings, encouraging notetaking on paper, establishing your organization’s “why,” practicing empathy, and relying less on email and more on face-to-face relationship building. The key is for leaders to bring more human interaction to their work.

Throughout the book, and especially the chapter on Millennials, Sinek underscores the importance of relationships, “not only to our survival, but also to our sense of fulfillment.”

—Sarah McKibben

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Relevant Read

Leadership, Relationships, and the Millennial Paradox


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It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit.

—Harry S. Truman

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Watch Simon Sinek’s video “Why Leaders Eat Last” and TED Talk “How Great Leaders Inspire Action.”
Tell me about how, as principal, you created teams that brought in people from outside your school—and how you used their talents.

When I arrived at Michele Clark, the school had two teams that included non-school people: our Local School Council and Parent Advisory Committee. As the new principal, I saw opportunities for more parental involvement and more active community involvement. I wanted everyone to feel like they were part of the vision. So I conducted surveys of the school community—teachers, staff, parents, and students—asking general questions like how welcoming the school was or what activities parents wanted to be a part of in the building. The responses showed that many parents and students felt left out.

We also held a series of town halls for the broader school community. These gatherings revealed a strong desire for more community and student voice in the school.

Many people said they didn’t feel “heard” or didn’t feel a connection with the school. A common phrase from parents was, “I drop my child off at school and pick them up.” Parents stayed after these meetings to talk about opportunities they wanted, such as having their student in after-school activities and sports. They wanted to be invited to more events at the building and build pride in the school. So I re-evaluated my vision and plan for the school and created leadership teams for students, parents, teachers, and community members. I helped these parents get involved with groups we formed, like our Parent University, which offers family members information, resources, and classes (in parenting but also in job skills and so on) to help them help their families.

What other teams have you developed that are led by a “non-school” person? How do they improve students’ experiences?

One example is Bigs in Blue, which is a mentorship program at the school that’s a pilot of the Big Brothers and Big Sisters program. It provides mentorship opportunities for current and retired police officers, who meet with their student mentees every week. The focus is on building relationships with the local police department. Mentors discuss with their student everything from grades and assignments to behavior and student goals. Students are challenged each meeting with things to work on, such as bringing up failing grades, boosting self-esteem, and building their leadership qualities.

We also have a partnership with BUILD Chicago (a group for at-risk youth). BUILD’s work with us focuses on providing social-emotional support for students. They lead several teams in the building, providing counseling, intervening when gang activity becomes a problem, and offering other outreach. Introspect is another community partner that leads several teams of students, staff, and parents on bridging students to post-secondary opportunities. The team organizes college visits for students and parents and does things to help make college affordable for our students.

Is it ever tricky to let community-led teams pursue their own vision for helping students while making sure their work matches the school’s mission and values?

We give community-connected teams the school’s vision statement, and the majority of conversations refer to that vision. During monthly Local School Council meetings, community teams share their progress, struggles, and next steps; this allows us to see what teams are up to and
provide support.

A great example of providing support was when Introspect was trying to involve parents in their college tours. They couldn’t understand why parents weren’t attending and were very frustrated. So our Local School Council provided them with multiple ideas for getting parents involved.

What pro and cons have you found to including family members and community people in school teams?

One “con”: Teams sometimes need help with leadership. Certain teams develop a lot of ideas, but something may be lacking in their ability to implement the ideas.

One “pro” is that having such teams lets voices be heard and people feel empowered. This has created a strong sense of ownership and school community. Often team members are from very different backgrounds and have varying demands—yet they find a way to stay on course and keep the work first.

Here’s a great example: During the uproar accompanying the trial of the Chicago police officer who fatally shot Laquan McDonald, huge unrest developed between the students and the local police. Some staff members, parents, police officers, and students met to discuss ways to bridge the divide and rebuild some trust. The end result was a back-to-school bash, held in the parking lot of the police department, with the community, schools, and police invited to celebrate students returning to school. We now do this every year.

Editor’s Note: This interview has been edited for space and clarity.

—Naomi Thiers

School Tools
Testing Your Team’s Types

Everyone brings something different to a team, but do you know what that difference is? These quick and free* online personality and skill-set tests can help your team better understand and work with one another.

Meyers-Briggs
A classic! Are you an INTJ or an ESFP? The official test, which can be administered online for a fee, is based on Carl Jung’s philosophy about personality types. But you can discover your type via numerous free versions such as 16Personalities or Truity.

High 5
A free, short version of the Gallup-developed StrengthsFinder test, High 5 reveals the five best traits you bring to a team.

DiSC
DiSC is a popular behavior assessment tool that teams can use to analyze how each member receives and gives information and the best ways to work with each type. Teams can bring in certified DiSC instructors to facilitate the test, but there are plenty of free versions, such as Crystal, that allow you to dip your toe in the water.

Implicit Bias
Developed by researchers at Harvard University, University of Virginia, and the University of Washington, this series of tests from Project Implicit can help you discover the implicit biases you bring to a team, school, or wider community—and help you pay more attention to the way you interact with other people.

Emotional Intelligence
Forget your IQ score, and find your team’s EI score with this online test. Results will give members a quick glimpse into their ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions in themselves and others.

*Tests may require you to register or provide personal information before getting results. Often further details or analysis can be obtained for a fee. See each site for details.

—Tara Laskowski
The Power of TEAM NORMS

Setting and sticking to norms can transform team dynamics.

Kathryn Parker Boudett and Meghan Lockwood

Improving education to meet the needs of all students requires that we deliberately engage the voices of all educators. In our experience working with schools and school systems around the world, we have found that norms can play a powerful role in eliciting the breadth of perspectives that is needed for a group of educators to tackle hard problems. And, along the way, teams that lean into norms often find that they ratchet up the “joy factor” of their collaborative work.

Norms are shared agreements about how a group will work together. They help us answer questions like: How will we treat one another? How will we engage with challenging content? What will we do if we disagree? Without having an explicit conversation about these questions, collaborative work tends to
reinforce inequitable patterns that exist within an organization or society. People with less positional power than others in the room may be hesitant to speak up. People from identity groups whose voices have historically been privileged may dominate conversations. As educators, we have the power to work toward a “new normal” on our teams. But it requires intentional effort to make this happen.

**Setting and Clarifying Norms**

Groups approach setting norms in different ways. Some start with a blank slate and brainstorm norms together. In other cases, the facilitator may propose a set of norms that are particularly useful for fostering equitable collaboration. If the team will be exploring how issues of race, diversity, inclusion, and equity play out within their school or system, it is especially important to consider a set of norms that will make that conversation productive.¹

In our work guiding teams doing collaborative data inquiry, we often open by sharing the norms adapted from *Meeting Wise*:
Making the Most of Collaborative Time for Educators (Harvard Education Press, 2014). Although these norms were originally developed to support school-based teams as they work through the Data Wise Improvement Process, we have found that they can be useful in a variety of settings, from teacher team meetings to central office workshops to faculty meetings at colleges and universities. As a general rule, limiting the number of norms to 5–7 makes it easier for teams to keep them in mind. Longer lists can send the message that everything is a priority, which of course means that nothing is.

Once a set of norms has been proposed, it is essential to provide time for the team to come to a shared understanding of what each norm really means. What would it look like and sound like if a particular norm were being followed? For example, the group might agree that taking an inquiry stance would involve asking questions from a place of genuine curiosity, not of judgment. The goal of questions is to clarify what team mates are saying. If group members know that their colleagues will take an inquiry stance, then they are more likely to trust that their perspective and insights will be understood.

When ground statements in evidence is first introduced as a potential norm, we have sometimes seen educators express concern that this means the group would only welcome statements that could be backed by formal research or hard numbers. But when discussing this norm, we encourage groups to hash out what they mean by “evidence.” It can feel much more authentic to define evidence to include specific and descriptive statements from team members’ own lived experiences or their observations of their students. Sharing rich stories about classroom experiences can be an essential step in dismantling inequitable practices in schools.

Once a draft set of norms is in place, it is time to ask: Are there any norms in this list that we can’t live with? and Do we need to adjust any norms to make them more useful? Personally, we have learned so much by asking teams these questions. For example, initially the third Meeting Wise norm was simply assume positive intentions. We explained to school teams that if someone said something that “rubbed them the wrong way,” the listener should assume that the statement was coming from a good place, rooted in a shared desire to do the best by all children, and perhaps then take an inquiry stance to better understand what was said.

However, as educators discussed this norm, they told us that it could be exhausting to assume positive intentions when their colleagues spoke or acted in ways that were insensitive or hurtful. To have meaningful conversations, people needed assurance that if they were negatively affected by someone, they could say so and know that the speaker would be willing to own that impact. This adjustment became so prevalent that we revised the norm to be assume positive intentions and take responsibility for impact, and we now make it clear that everyone in the group is expected to act on feedback about how their statements are being received. Teams that agree to this norm commit to maintaining a growth mindset, meaning they give individuals an opportunity to address their blind spots and they resolve, as a team, to learn their way into
working together more effectively.

When discussing a draft set of norms with large teams, we often allow time for people to turn to the person next to them and check in about how they feel about the list. Making time for one-on-one discussion of norms can ensure that everyone has a chance to explore concerns they may have before sharing with the broader group. When it is time for group discussion, the goal is to get to a place where people feel comfortable enough that they are willing to “play along” with the list for a few meetings.

**Upholding Norms**

The initial norms conversation is not over until the group has discussed what they will do if a norm is not being followed. Some teams have a lot of fun at this point, doing short role-plays where they deliberately violate a norm and test out different ways of addressing it. For example, someone could start checking email on their phone and the group could test-drive a few ways of reminding one another about the norm to be here now. Using humor in a low-stakes situation can help a group come up with playful ways to hold themselves accountable when it really matters. We’ve seen people agree to raise an eyebrow, tap their chin, or even hum when they feel a norm is being broken. It may be silly, but these types of agreed-upon gestures can get the job done: They provide a way for the group to hold itself to its shared promises.

Generally, though, the simplest, most straightforward way to uphold norms is for team members to speak up if they see a norm being violated. Reminding a colleague about a norm can feel uncomfortable, which is why it is so helpful to practice doing so as part of the norms-setting process. It will be easier to uphold norms during a real meeting if team members rehearse saying statements like, “I’ve noticed that we’ve been hearing from about half of the team during this discussion, and keeping in mind our norm of hearing all voices, I’m wondering if we might open up space for others to contribute.” And let’s face it: There is a very real power dynamic at play if a teacher is thinking about pointing out that his principal is breaking the start and end on time norm by showing up to a meeting 10 minutes late. It is critical to agree ahead of time how the group as a whole will uphold the high standards they have set for themselves. If calling out someone in the moment feels like too much of a stretch, appoint a team member to serve as the “norms checker” for each meeting. This can take the pressure off individuals to decide how and when to point out norm violations.

Norms can be useful in a variety of settings, from teacher team meetings to central office workshops to faculty meetings at colleges and universities.
One of the most effective tools we have found for keeping norms alive in a group is the plus/delta protocol.

Keeping Norms Alive
In order for norms to make a difference in how a team works together, the team needs to revisit its norms continually. In fact, while it’s important for a group to agree on norms when the team first forms, norms are most useful once the group is far enough along in its work for the “honeymoon” stage to have ended and disagreements to arise. If we don’t keep our norms alive, they will be of no use to us when we get to this point.

To ensure that norms are top of mind, some teams display them on a table tent during each meeting. Others print their norms in the header or footer of their meeting agenda so they are available for easy reference. When we are working with a group, we periodically include a “norms check-in” as an agenda item. During this time, team members can rate themselves on how well they think they are following each norm and choose a norm to focus on for the remainder of the meeting. It can be useful for team members to share their thinking with a partner or with the whole group. We’ll often hear a team member say, “Please, everyone, remind me if I’m not taking an inquiry stance—I know that one is so easy for me to forget!”

Especially in a larger group, it can be useful to gather and discuss evidence on how well the group thinks each norm is being followed. A quick survey about norms might reveal that half the group thinks that the norm is being followed “all of the time.” Identifying that kind of discrepancy in perception can lead to a useful discussion about what that norm looks like, because the data suggest that group members are thinking about it differently. Revisiting norms frequently helps people monitor their participation in meetings and develop common language to discuss how the group works together. A simpler way of collecting data is to have the “norms checker” gather and share evidence on how well norms are being followed. For example, this person could be charged with reporting back to the group about the number of people who arrived on time to a meeting or the number of times each person spoke. When the norms checker shares the data at the end of the meeting, it will be understood that they are not being “negative”; they are just doing their job.

One of the most effective tools we have found for keeping norms alive in a group is the plus/delta protocol. This is a simple method that takes about five minutes at the end of a meeting and gets everyone involved. The group is asked to identify “pluses,” things that worked well in the meeting, and “deltas,” things to change for next time to improve how the group works together (the Greek letter delta is also a symbol for change). This dedicated time for reflection is the perfect opportunity to consider which norms are being followed, to the benefit of the group, and which might need more attention.

Then, at the beginning of each meeting, the facilitator presents a summary of the plus/delta feedback from the prior meeting and explains how the feedback was taken into account while planning the current meeting. For example, if a delta is that the group struggled with the norm to hear all voices, the facilitator might explain how they will be using a discussion protocol designed to address this. Instead of problem solving through open discussion, for instance, they might start by having everyone silently write ideas for addressing a challenge on sticky notes and then work together to sort the ideas and discuss interconnections. When team members see facilitators making changes as a result of deltas,

GUIDING QUESTIONS

› How could norms, implemented intentionally, guide the work of a school or district team you’re on?
› Which of the Meeting Wise norms would be most applicable to your team?
› Are any noticeably missing in your team’s work?
› Based on what you read, how could your team respectfully “norm check” one another to ensure accountability?
it’s amazing how substantive and constructive their feedback can become.

**Leaning into Joy**
When norms that support equitable participation come alive, people start to feel like they can bring their full authentic selves to their team’s work. They can spend less time silently fuming and more time laughing out loud at how many reminders everyone needs to live up to the expectations for inclusive teamwork that they have set for themselves.

Trying to improve education is emotional work because the problems we are trying to solve are so difficult. If there were straightforward solutions to problems, we would have found them already. We will only make meaningful improvements in teaching and learning for all students if we bring in everyone’s perspectives and hear voices that historically have been less audible, even silenced.

At first we may discover that our colleagues have different assumptions about how a meeting should run and what it means to function as a team. That’s why it’s so important to bring tacit assumptions to the surface and come to a shared understanding of what it will look like to work together effectively to help all students thrive.

1For example, Darnisa Amante’s *Disruptive Equity Education Project* and Glenn Singleton’s *Courageous Conversation protocol* involve having people make explicit agreements about how they will engage in conversations about race.

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**Kathryn Parker Boudett** is a senior lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where she also serves as director of the Master’s Program in Learning and Teaching and director of the Data Wise Project. **Meghan Lockwood**, a former teacher and 6th grade team leader, is a graduate of the doctoral program at Harvard Graduate School of Education and a certified Data Wise coach.
Educator teams embody an amazing potential to shape school culture, increase student and staff engagement, and accelerate achievement, yet many stymie that power by merely operating the way they always have. In our work as professional learning facilitators and leadership coaches, we have seen leaders and team members alike fail to harness the potential of their teams and instead inadvertently sabotage their work. As educators focused on school improvement, we need to facilitate, model, and promote effective team dynamics to capitalize on student and teacher growth.

Here are eight ways that teams can sabotage the effectiveness of their own work and how they can fix these issues.

1. **Fear of Exclusion**

   **What It Looks Like**
   Leaders invite too many people to the table, which dilutes the team’s goals and actions and lessens its impact.

   **Why It Happens**
   Leaders fear excluding people. They often worry about leaving someone out and
therefore end up inviting people to a team who may not offer added value. Priya Parker warns about this tendency in *The Art of Gathering*: “There is never an easy way to say, ‘Please don’t come.’ That’s why so many of our gatherings end up being hijacked in the name of politeness. . . . I have learned that far too often in the name of inclusion and generosity, two values I care about deeply, we fail to draw boundaries about who belongs and why” (p. 38). Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos supports this idea with his *pizza principle*. Bezos believes that no matter how large your company gets, individual teams shouldn’t be larger than what two pizzas can feed.

**How We Fix It**

Construct teams large enough to offer varying perspectives, but small enough to be productive and gain traction. Depending on the team’s goals and the nature of collaboration required, the ideal size for most school teams is four to six members. This group size does not allow much room for “dead weight” and puts greater responsibility on each participant. Leaders should reflect carefully on the team’s desired outcomes, skill sets needed, and what each team member can contribute. This will enable them to provide a clear rationale for both inclusion and exclusion should a staff member feel left out, and help teams be more productive once they are established.

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2 **Not Fully Prepared**

**What It Looks Like**

Team members come to the meeting unprepared to tackle the problems at hand. The meeting begins, everyone looks at each other, and no one wants to talk, or team
members leave with confirmed commitments, but no one communicates or touches base—even informally—until the next team meeting. Team members are present while they are in the room together, but do not adequately prepare between meetings to propel the team’s momentum forward.

**Why It Happens**
Leaders often do not communicate to their teams what each member’s role is and what is expected between meetings. Members arrive without having taken any actions or making forward progress because the team has failed to identify (and follow through on) pre-reading, preparation, or next steps to maximize their collaboration time.

This can cause problems during the meeting as well. Team members may be afraid to speak up, for fear of looking like a “know it all,” or desperately try to fake their understanding or competence because they don’t entirely understand the meeting’s purpose and are afraid to ask.

**How We Fix It**
Clearly define team members’ roles and close each meeting with specific next steps. Make sure all members know what actions they need to take before the next meeting and commit to share the progress they make. As William H. Whyte once wrote in *Fortune* magazine, “The great enemy of communication, we find, is the illusion of it.”

Many leaders understand their goals and expectations, but they do not put “what’s in their head” on paper. And even if they do put it on paper, they don’t continue to communicate their thoughts and ideas. Ed Savage, director of training and development for L3 Technologies, states that leaders “must repeat a message 17 times to get it through, fully accepted, and then acted upon by a listener” (Mayeux, 2012).

Taking meeting notes in a collaborative document can provide a resource for team members to refer back to as needed. Leaders might also consider following up with team members between meetings in a variety of formats (such as email, project boards, or verbal check-ins) to revisit goals and expectations and ensure the work is continuing to move forward.

### 2 Too Much Baggage

**What It Looks Like**
Team members enter a meeting carrying other issues and concerns that aren’t relevant to the meeting’s purpose. They may be weighed down by a challenging interaction with a student, poor assessment results, or even personal circumstances that distract them from the team’s work.

**Why It Happens**
Life can be messy. It’s sometimes hard to check our baggage at the door when entering a meeting. In the same way our students bring their outside lives into the classroom, team members, too, carry their other professional (and personal) experiences into meetings.

**How We Fix It**
Open with a check-in question to help people clear their minds from other tasks and worries and focus on the meeting at hand. An example might be, “If you could instantly become an expert in something, what would it be?” or, “If you had one extra hour per day, how would you use it?”

Another easy solution is to facilitate a “top of mind” protocol, where each team member writes on a sticky note what is “top of mind” in either their professional or personal life. Team members then place their sticky notes somewhere on the other side of the room, where these challenges and concerns remain until after the meeting. The physical act of writing concerns down and moving them away from the meeting table helps team members get them off their minds and focus on key priorities.

### 3 Recognition Over Results

**What It Looks Like**
Educators, who often work in isolation, may be more focused on their own needs and wants than on
collaborating on school or district-oriented results. For example, a team member might focus on what schedule configuration would give her the lightest load or strongest assessment results rather than on what is best for the department as a whole.

Why It Happens
If one individual conceptualizes a great idea, they may not want the other team members to get credit for it. When teachers work in silos, it inhibits their ability—and in time their willingness—to learn from others.

How We Fix It
Focus on collective goals, and the ways that team members can support one another’s collaborative success. When organizational members engage in effective dialogue, they learn as a team, and, as a result, produce more effective and aligned decisions that support the organization’s shared vision and enhance individuals’ sense of personal mastery (Senge, et al., 2012). Leaders should also try to give positive feedback and recognition, where appropriate, when a team achieves the organization’s shared vision.

5 “Oh, Look, a Squirrel!”

What It Looks Like
Teams bounce from topic to topic without an agenda or clear goals to guide their work. They value one another’s collaborative capacity, but struggle to actualize real change.

Why It Happens
“Squirrel syndrome,” or a lack of focus, occurs when teams don’t have clear goals and a skilled facilitator to keep them focused. They get caught up in the spirit of healthy conversation but fail to make real progress toward their goals.

How We Fix It
Set an agenda prior to the meeting and stick to it. Identify a strong facilitator to guide collaboration and keep the group on task. Consider framing each agenda with the team’s goal(s) to maintain a consistent focus on collective priorities. Within the agenda, set clear timestamps for each discussion and action item to ensure the team keeps pace. If/when a meeting topic derails, these guideposts will enable the facilitator to carefully steer the conversation back on course.

6 Failing to Follow Through

What It Looks Like
Team members don’t follow through on commitments, and it damages the team’s effectiveness, including its ability to create a culture for growth. Colleagues join teams—sometimes too many teams—but are not fully committed to their goals, purpose, and actions.

Why It Happens
Priorities are unclear and often compete with one another. There is not a clear vision or action steps guiding the school or district’s work (in an actionable way). Commitment has not been firmly established as a part of the organization’s collaborative culture or participants are overcommitted to too many teams.

How We Fix It
Accountability is one of the hardest competencies for teams to fully master because it takes time and follow-through to keep individuals on the hook. Effective teams commit to mutually accountable actions—and follow through. McChesney, Covey, & Huling (2012) refer to this discipline as creating a cadence of accountability in which leaders check-in weekly with their teams to report on commitments, learn from successes and failures, and clear the path to make new commitments.

7 Stymied by Silos

What It Looks Like
Schools and districts operate in a variety of silos based on grade levels, content areas, experience levels, and even
cliques. For example, veteran teachers may not interact with new teachers, or curriculum might be adjusted at one end of a grade band without consideration for the impact it might have at the other end.

**Why It Happens**

Silos occur because schools and districts become too comfortable with current structures, familiar team members, and existing curriculum or policies. They fear “rocking the boat,” and comfort is confused with effectiveness. Team members default to protecting their turf and resist change—even if such change is in the best interest of the school or district as a whole.

**How We Fix It**

Foster a collaborative environment. Place district and school goals in public spaces such as hallways or a team planning room. Create cross-functional committees or vertically aligned planning times in schools to encourage people from different groups to interact with one another. In professional learning sessions, group teachers and staff randomly to push them to collaborate beyond their existing silos.

8 **Meeting to Meet**

8 **What It Looks Like**

Teams convene on a particular day and time because it is on their calendar, even if no clear goal has been established and communicated.

**Why It Happens**

We are creatures of habit, which is why so often we get stuck in having meetings for meeting’s sake. Meetings provide us with a false sense of accomplishment because they can be easily checked off our to-do list.

**How We Fix It**

Maintain consistency and structure for team stability, but don’t be afraid to cancel meetings or shift them to email communication when appropriate. Reflect on the collaborative power of convening. Does it add value, or is it simply an item to cross off your action plan? This will help leaders determine if teams truly need to meet.

**Stop the Team Sabotage**

In the book *The New School Rules* (2018), Kim and Gonzales-Black write, “Many people have a natural desire to work in teams, which is a positive impulse that can be harnessed to create thriving school cultures and outcomes. . . . The challenge is to overcome the problems that are working against the very enthusiasm and creativity we all want” (p. 142). Don’t be afraid to change the rules and the ways in which your teams are formed, established, and operated. Avoid silence, squirrels, and silos, and instead, foster high-powered teams that promote collaborative goals, mutual commitments, and unparalleled results.

**References**


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When teams believe and are confident in their abilities to make an impact, they tend to perform better. This phenomenon—which is called collective efficacy—has a powerful impact to make good teams great. In education, collective efficacy influences student achievement and can create positive change in schools. But how do teams come to see themselves as high-performing? How is collective efficacy developed? And how can teams strive for it?

Collective efficacy is strengthened when increases in student achievement are realized based on the sustained efforts of high-powered teams within schools. This process—which we call quality implementation—involves a critical mass of people doing their best to apply and experiment with evidence-based strategies, learning whether and why the strategies worked (or didn’t) within their respective contexts, and then making the necessary modifications. You know you have quality implementation when teams make what’s supposed to work actually work in their schools and classrooms.

These teams do more than welcome new instructional practices into the mix. They tolerate the discomfort felt throughout the change process and work to take control, invest in their work, and shape experiences based on high expectations. Highly effective teams do not let constraints get in their way. They rally to get a critical mass behind decisions, doing the right thing, for the right reason, at the right time, while assessing the impact of their actions. They find ways to bring theory and practice together to produce positive outcomes for students—regardless of other circumstances. They go outside their comfort zones, use focused, goal-driven inquiry to improve an area of weakness, and make changes based on feedback.

Teamwork in Action
In our work supporting high-quality professional learning in schools and districts, we have witnessed how teams enhance their collective efficacy. We once observed five teams of teachers at a high school in Ontario, Canada, who were charged with closing a large achievement gap between students enrolled in applied courses (workplace-bound) and
academic courses (university-bound). These teams, each led by a teacher, identified a few evidence-based strategies on which to focus their implementation efforts, including co-constructed learning intentions and success criteria, the effective use of feedback, cross-curricular literacy instruction, and responsive, differentiated support.

As a professional learning community, teachers on each team voluntarily observed one another’s practices in these areas as they worked to get better. When they discovered how to make these promising practices really work in their classrooms, the teams designed learning opportunities for the whole faculty to spread the learning throughout the school.

What struck us most about the teams at this school was that they did not hesitate to examine their current practices publicly and critically. They spent time together trying to figure out what quality implementation really meant, regardless of their content-area specialties. They went beyond individual opinion and conjecture to collective reflection based on evidence. They identified and solved dilemmas of practice. They were accountable to themselves and each other for their actions and shared priorities.

That spring, standardized assessment results showed that the gap in achievement between students enrolled in applied courses and students enrolled in academic courses decreased by 21 percent, due to significant gains by students in the applied track. The results were not only affirming to the teachers, but also eye-opening as the teachers realized how their efforts resulted in measurable increases for students in their school.

The team’s quality implementation experience resulted in further refinements to their practice. The team noticed innovative and lasting improvement as what was working began to spread throughout the school. More and more teachers understood the strategies they were using with greater depth and, more important, they learned how to make them work in their respective classroom contexts. And teachers felt empowered, gaining a sense of voice and agency in school improvement efforts. When teachers got better, students got better. As student results continued to increase, so did the faculty’s collective efficacy.

Mastery Experiences

As we saw in Ontario, a firm sense of collective efficacy, developed through quality implementation, is a significant contributor to successful school improvement. But how exactly do high-powered teams form positive beliefs about what they are able to accomplish?

The most effective way is through repeated successes—what we call mastery moments—because they are based on firsthand experiences (Bandura, 1977). When teams set out to accomplish a task and achieve success based on sustained efforts, it raises mastery expectations. Teams come to believe that through their combined efforts, they can accomplish future goals. They raise their expectations for future success because they experienced success in the past. We saw this in Ontario with the teacher teams. When their efforts to improve students’ test scores and overall experiences in school had paid off, the teams did not become complacent and consider their job done. They continued to refine their work and look for additional ways to work together to address students’ needs.

Mastery experiences build confidence and motivate teams. Drawing on four decades of scientific research on human motivation, Pink (2009) identified mastery as one of the three elements of true motivation. He defined mastery as “the desire to get better and better at something that matters” (p. 111). That desire fuels

"You know you have quality implementation when teams make what’s supposed to work actually work in their schools and classrooms."
motivational investments and persistent effort. For the high school teams in Ontario, getting better at meeting the needs of students, as evidenced by the improved achievement results, led to teachers being highly motivated to continue their work.

Four Processes That Create Mastery Experiences
In our experience, highly successful teams create the conditions for mastery by focusing on the following four processes: Learning together, cause-and-effect relationships, goal-directed behavior, and purposeful practice. Let’s look at each more closely.

Learning Together
Professional team-based learning—the kind that has the goal of achieving quality implementation—requires more than just time and space for teachers to meet. The type of collaboration indicative of quality implementation is what we refer to as joint-work. We borrow this term from Judith Warren Little’s (1990) seminal article in which she calls for a harder look at what is meant by collaboration and the circumstances that foster or inhibit it. Little notes that teachers’ collaborations range from sporadic contacts among peers to “joint-work of a more rigorous and enduring sort” (p. 513). Joint-work involves teachers engaging in “deliberation over difficult and recurring problems of teaching and learning” (p. 520) in the service of finding a better way. When high-powered teams come together, they focus their time on identifying and collaboratively solving the problems that are rooted in the learning needs of their students.

These teachers’ work involves an interdependence, where motivation to participate is based on the fact that each other’s contributions are required in order to succeed. In 2002, Gully and his colleagues published a meta-analysis demonstrating that the relationship between collective efficacy and team performance is maximized when there is greater positive interdependence among the members of the team. Little notes that joint-work is about the acceptance of shared responsibility: “Professional autonomy and discretion reside collectively with the faculty; put more forcefully, each one’s teaching is everyone’s business, and each one’s success is everyone’s responsibility” (p. 523).

Cause-and-Effect Relationships
In many school improvement initiatives, educators are more interested in results (effects) than what caused those results (implementation of evidence-based strategies). High-powered teams ensure they make direct links between cause and effect, and these “moments of insight” (Heath & Heath, 2017) become memorable mastery experiences. They do this by frequently examining evidence of student learning and ensuring their conversations help to answer questions such as: What was the impact of X? What do we see that suggests that students understand or do not understand? What patterns in students’ work suggest that we should continue to teach this way—or what suggests that we need to try something else? Are we getting a year’s growth for a year’s input?

One team at the Ontario high school, for example, had a moment of insight during an observation in a 9th grade applied classroom.
The team had identified strategies to draw out students’ inferences, including: (a) chunking a high-interest text (Joseph Boyden’s *Walk to Morning*); (b) using a “What do we know?/What do we wonder?” chart; and (c) asking the question, “What makes you think that?” when students offered responses.

The class being observed was identified as challenging because it was offered at the end of the day and contained only boys—many of whom were identified as at-risk. Most of the teachers on the team taught these students in different classes throughout the day and were skeptical that the strategy could make a difference.

As the lesson played out, however, students raised their hands, offered insightful comments, took risks, made predictions and inferences, and revised their thinking aloud as they worked their way through the text. Every student contributed. When the class emptied out at the end of the day, one teacher sat for a long time deep in thought. Finally, she said, “I feel horrible. I always thought these students weren’t capable. The insight they had was astounding! It sickens me that I thought they couldn’t infer from texts. These strategies really worked!”

**Goal-Directed Behavior**

Goal-directed behavior is another key to creating the conditions for mastery in schools. However, Pink (2009) noted that not all goals are created equal: “Goals that are devoted to attaining mastery are usually healthy” (p. 50). Performance goals, on the other hand, do little to intrinsically motivate teams. They often result in pressure on teachers’ personal time, stress, and burn-out.

Mastery goals, by contrast, orient teams toward acquiring new skills, trying to understand their work, and improving their collective capacity. They are instrumental to quality implementation. Mastery goals—such as learning how to teach the skill of inference—help focus high-powered teams’ attention on the learning needed to master tasks. The desire to get better and better at something intrinsically motivates teams to figure out why certain strategies did not work as intended and to pay careful attention to feedback about how to adjust their practices.

We are not suggesting that performance goals should go by the wayside. In fact, research has demonstrated that when mastery goals are met, performance goals take care of themselves (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). What is important to note is that high-powered teams know that in situations where primarily the acquisition of knowledge and skills are required, a specific challenging mastery goal should be set—not just a performance goal.

**Purposeful Practice**

High-powered teams understand that practice is the only way to become proficient in new skills. But what’s important is the type of practice in which teams engage. Katz, Dack, and Malloy (2018) draw on research to underscore the relationship between a special kind of practice—purposeful practice—and improvement. The four key elements of purposeful practice are narrow goals, a specific area of focus, a clear plan about how to reach the goals, and the means of monitoring progress (Ericson & Pool, 2016). Katz et. al also noted that there is no reason to expect significant improvement to occur “without specific, deliberate efforts to improve using purposeful practice” (p. 65).

When teacher teams are engaged in purposeful
practice, they cannot be easily distracted. Feedback is integral to monitoring and can come from a variety of sources, including the team itself or a trusted, credible expert, such as a coach or an administrator. However, the most important source of feedback for teacher teams comes from the students they are serving. After completing his first synthesis of his research on factors that drive achievement in schools, John Hattie told us that he realized that feedback was actually more powerful when teachers received feedback from their students rather than just giving it. High-powered teams ask students what they understand and don’t understand. They gather information about students’ misconceptions, the errors students make, and their lack of engagement. As high-powered teams use feedback to make purposeful adjustments in their practice, learning is enhanced, improvement is realized, and efficacy increases.

Mastery and Improvement
Collective efficacy is a critical belief system for improving student outcomes. Research shows that collective efficacy matters more in relation to increasing student achievement than the neighborhoods where students come from and their level of household income (Donohoo, Hattie, & Eells, 2018). Teacher collective efficacy influences student achievement because greater efficacy drives key behaviors that are instrumental to quality implementation. Mastery experiences show high-powered teams that they are capable of achieving great things together. As teams recognize that their efforts are paying off, they begin to increase their confidence in each other and, as a result, push each other to do even greater things.

Guiding Questions

If a team you’re on right now is not performing as well as it should, what do you think is most hindering its progress?

Of the four key processes the authors mention, which do you think is the most difficult to implement? Which is the easiest? Why?

Think of a time—either on a team or individually—when you felt motivated by seeing success from your efforts. How did that drive you to improve and continue your work? How did it make you feel?

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The path to developing empowered team dynamics can be just as important as the destination.

Peter DeWitt

Collective teacher efficacy is all the rage these days. We read about it in education publications, talk about the related research at meetings and conferences, and do our best to put it into practice in our schools. In my book Collaborative Leadership: 6 Influences That Matter Most (Corwin, 2016), I rank collective teacher efficacy as one of the most important influences on school leadership today.

The reason that collective efficacy has become such an important focus for school leaders and teachers is simple: It can have a marked positive impact on student learning. It’s important to understand, however, that collective efficacy doesn’t just happen, especially in schools that are beset by low morale and top-down mandates. It requires a great deal of trust, which must be built over time,
and an intentional effort by educators to buck the status quo. Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004) define collective efficacy as the “collective self-perception that teachers in a given school make an educational difference to their students over and above the educational impact of their homes and communities.” I often look at it this way: Whereas self-efficacy is the confidence we have in ourselves, collective efficacy is the confidence we have in our group to make a difference.

There are a lot of factors involved in getting to that point. As Goddard and coauthors (2004, p. 3) found, “The connections between collective efficacy beliefs and student outcomes depend in part on the reciprocal relationships among these collective efficacy beliefs, teachers’ personal sense of efficacy, teachers’ professional practice, and teachers’ influence over instructionally relevant school decisions.” What this means to me is that the road to collective efficacy—the way in which educators take the reins and see they can change the status quo—may be just as important as the destination.

A Time of School Crisis
When I was a school principal, there were a few years when we felt like everything was coming to an end in public education. Our small school district in upstate New York was experiencing millions of dollars in budget cuts, there were teacher and administrator layoffs, enrollment was down, and many families were moving out of state due to the high cost of living.

On top of all that, the district had to close a one-classroom-per-grade-level school, and the school that I led was faced with the challenge of absorbing the whole student population from that school. All of this took place at the height of the NCLB-driven accountability era, which had its own demoralizing effects.

What matters is that teachers are able to take charge of an element of teaching and learning and see the difference they can make through working together.
I knew I couldn’t take on all of these challenges on my own, nor did I want to, because I had an amazing staff that I loved and could count on. The Zulu have the word Ubuntu, which means “I am because we are.” That is certainly how I felt about the staff I led at the time, and I believe the sentiment works perfectly for discussions around collective teacher efficacy.

During this trying time, many of us felt as though we had lost our value as educators because our voices no longer seemed to be listened to in educational conversations at the state and national level. Collective teacher efficacy happens when teachers have “influence over instructionally relevant school decisions” (Goddard et al., 2004), and that certainly didn’t seem to be happening. Within our school, I began to hear teachers express concerns about low morale—a sign for me that teachers didn’t feel they were meaningfully engaged in their work.

The Power of Chart Paper
Our school had a Principal’s Advisory Council that met once a month, made up of school leaders and a representative from each grade level and specials area. Although I was the principal, I did not typically run the meeting. That was left up to two cochairs, who often challenged my thinking. The council was meant to focus on our building climate, so what better place to have a discussion around morale?

At our meeting in October 2012, I asked if I could start with an activity. I spoke to the committee members about morale being low in the school, and suggested we dig deeper into this situation together. There was an easel with chart paper in the front of the library, where the meeting was always held, and markers and stickers sat on each table. I asked each member of the committee to go up to the easel and write every reason they could think of for why we had low morale. After they finished what turned out to be a lengthy list, I handed each of them three stickers and asked them to put their stickers next to the issues that they felt contributed most to low morale. They could put all their stickers next to one issue or distribute them among the items on the list.

Out of a few issues with multiple stickers, the one that had the most stickers by far was that teachers felt they no longer had a voice in their own professional development. This was not surprising to me because, with all the policy changes at the time, our professional development days were taken up by discussion of state and district accountability measures. We were always scrambling to meet external mandates rather than focusing on our own priorities.

This, in retrospect, was where we began our quest for collective efficacy. Together as a PAC, we decided that our school would start with taking control of some of our own professional learning and development.

Flipping the Faculty Meeting
Through subsequent conversations at the meeting, we determined that the focus of our professional development effort would be on providing effective feedback, an area where we agreed that we struggled as a faculty, but also one that we had the internal capacity to address. We also decided that flipping our regular faculty meetings might be the best way to start. A flipped faculty meeting is a process where staff and the principal co-construct a goal for the meeting together, and then a few days before the meeting takes place, the principal (or another involved leader) shares a resource, such as a blog, article, or video, that models how to meet that goal.

“I often look at it this way: Whereas self-efficacy is the confidence we have in ourselves, collective efficacy is the confidence we have in our group to make a difference.”
About three days before our faculty meeting, I crafted an email to all staff explaining the flipped process, our PAC activity, and our determination. I attached an article by Grant Wiggins from the most recent issue of Educational Leadership on providing effective feedback. I asked the faculty to read the article and bring to the meeting evidence of the feedback they provide to students so we could share our expertise with each other. Additionally, I offered a couple of questions about the article to ponder while reading it.

One thing we know about self-efficacy is that not everyone feels confident in every part of their job, so flipping a meeting structure in this manner allows people to gain some surface-level knowledge before the meeting. They can then take a greater role in discussing issues at the meeting, which in turn builds both collective knowledge and self-confidence. Remember, as Goddard noted, “teachers’ personal sense of efficacy” is important to collective efficacy.

Through that individual effort, teachers can come together and build on the confidence each has, which will sometimes result in collective efficacy. At the next faculty meeting, we discussed the article and shared best practices. We worked on a common language and a common understanding of effective feedback practices. After that meeting, as I visited classrooms, I could see a transfer of learning from what we explored together at the meeting, and I saw how many teachers were incorporating better feedback practices into their instruction. For me, this was an example of collective efficacy. We worked on an issue, learned together, and then some of that learning changed what was happening in classrooms.

The Collective Efficacy Cycle

Sometimes collective efficacy in a school develops in this way. It comes from a moment when we realize we need to improve a situation and take collective action. My school’s collaborative efforts to provide more effective feedback to students ultimately resulted in academic and social-emotional gains for students, which in turn further boosted our sense of collective efficacy.

But leaders and teachers don’t have to wait for a crisis to start efforts to build collective teacher efficacy. Even at times when the bottom doesn’t seem to be dropping out, educators can work to build collective efficacy and improve the learning environment for students by looking collaboratively at their grading practices, creating restorative justice programs, or finding strategies to improve their teaching of conceptual understandings to students. What matters is that teachers are able to take charge of an element of teaching and learning and see the difference they can make through working together.

To help educator groups start working toward collective efficacy, I’ve created, from a variety of sources, a diagram of the elements involved in the process (fig. 1). The work begins by co-constructing a goal together, which means ensuring that all participants have an authentic voice in the process. Then team members work together...
to examine and test solutions and examine evidence of impact (Hattie, 2012). If strategies do not work, the collective efficacy process necessitates refining ideas and trying again. Lastly, team members should take into account the simple pleasures of working together through a challenge—and take time to celebrate their success (Donohoo, 2013).

Another important point that’s not on this figure: To build collective teacher efficacy, leaders need to make sure team members understand why they are coming together in the first place. This may sound obvious, but more times than I can count, I’ve witnessed situations where people are asked to be a part of the group, or are volununtold to do so, and they really have no idea why they are there. It’s very difficult to build collective teacher efficacy when people do not understand why they are in the room.

Below are some suggestions to prevent that from happening. At the outset of an initiative, make sure you:
- Define why each member is a part of the team.
- Define the expectations of being on the team.
- Co-construct a goal together around the initiative you’re focused on.
- Assign duties for each member of the team.
- Promote and support discourse among the team.

Banding Together

In that difficult stretch during my tenure as a principal, our school community faced many challenges stemming from administrative changes and regulatory mandates. But we did not let this fracture our building-level community. This reminds me of something Michael Fullan told me a few years ago: “Just because you’re stuck with their policies doesn’t mean you need to be stuck with their mindset.” As a staff, we decided we would band together to take control of some of our learning and create a new mindset on what we could achieve, starting with the practice of providing effective feedback. I didn’t realize it at the time, but we were indeed building collective teacher efficacy.

References


Peter DeWitt, a former principal, is the author of many books including his newest, Coach It Further, Using the Art of Coaching to Improve School Leadership (Corwin, 2018). He runs workshops and gives keynotes nationally and internationally. Find out more on his website.
Daniel R. Venables

I spend my days training professional learning community facilitators in what authentic PLCs do, how they do it, and how to lead other teachers in doing it. When these working teams of educators are done well, they are a force to be reckoned with in terms of their ability to make a real difference in student learning. They are the “surest, fastest path to instructional improvement” (Schmoker, 2006). But though they have become commonplace in schools across the United States, this ubiquity has led to PLCs that are PLCs in title only, operating as a diluted version of the original principles of authentic PLCs. In my day job traveling to schools and districts, I get to see this problem up close and firsthand. In fact, the reason schools most often invite me in is to fix this very problem.

One of the primary reasons that teams become dysfunctional is that most of their meeting time is allocated to planning the what and the when. As in: What are we doing next week? When should we start the fractions unit? When should we test on the Civil War unit? What review materials should we use? What do we do about the assembly on Friday? Should we wait to test? Should we wait to start Chapter 4?

You get the idea.

To be fair, all of these issues—and many more—need to be discussed and decided on. The problem resides in how seldom teams get around to addressing the how of instruction. This leaves teachers to their own devices and perpetuates that status quo.

I don’t proclaim to have an exact number, but I’m willing to bet that in an overwhelming number of circumstances, teachers, alone or in teams, generally fall back on the default mode of teaching a given topic, which is to teach the lesson...
(or unit) the way they did last year. This default mode, while time-saving and convenient, generally circumvents any questioning of the effectiveness of last year’s lesson. Yet this is exactly what authentic PLCs do. Unless and until teacher teams commit to continually addressing the question, So, how are we going to teach this?, they may never be high-functioning. Therein lies the key to effective PLCs. Authentic PLCs spend the lion’s share of their time discussing and deciding the best way to teach concept X. They’re not spending meeting after meeting belaboring SMART goals or filling out forms and templates or drafting lofty shared vision statements; they are creating lessons, finding lessons online, scoring these lessons using the rubric suggested later in this article, and deliberating the best way to teach a particular topic. And this does not require that everyone in the PLC
teaches the same thing; in most small schools, this is not even possible.

The byproduct of this labor of love is the creation of a culture that enables teachers to develop and teach amazing lessons. This is how schools improve; this is how student learning improves. PLCs have the ability to greatly impact what is happening at ground zero: the classroom.

Social Versus Human Capital

Let’s face it: If you want to improve schools, you have to improve what is happening in schools, what is happening in classrooms, and what is happening with individual teachers. School policy, curriculum, community support, even school leadership—while important—do not change schools to the same degree that improving classroom instruction does (Center for Public Education, 2005; Hattie, 2008; Leana, 2011).

We used to think that improving the effectiveness of individual teachers meant sending those teachers to conferences, graduate courses, summer workshops, and so forth. And, in many cases, these professional learning opportunities turned out to do just that. But we now know that, in terms of net effect on student learning, improving human capital—the talents and skill sets of individual teachers—pales in comparison to improving social capital—the quality of the interactions among teachers within a school. In her extensive research involving 6,000 teachers and 200 schools, University of Pittsburgh professor Carrie Leanna has repeatedly demonstrated that it is the quality of the social interactions among teachers that best predicts student achievement in a school. She explains:

After decades of failed programs aimed at improving student achievement through teacher human capital and principal leadership, investments in social capital are cheap by comparison and offer far more promise of measurable gains for students. (Leanna, 2011, p. 6)

So how do we do this? How do we improve the quality of interactions among teachers?

Beyond Show and Tell

When I began my teaching career in (cough) 1980, very little was shared between teachers of a common subject. If anything was shared at all, it was done so during brief hallway meetings while kids passed by or during an after-school department meeting in which teachers, in turn, shared what they were working on with their students. Since, at that time, teaching anything outside of an ordinary textbook lecture was considered novel, teachers often brought these new activities to share at their meetings. But no feedback was ever given, no suggestions ever made. Each teacher’s exposé of the cool “project” she intended to give her students was met with thunderous applause, but nary a single word to help make that project even better. These were not collaborative teams. These were not professional learning communities. These were individuals at a department meeting who were asked to share something they were planning to try with their students. And because there was no format or structure for giving feedback, none was given.

Fast-forward to the present. The walls of teacher isolation are coming down. Though these walls still exist in pockets of American public education, and in disturbingly disproportionate frequency in high schools, initiatives to break down isolation and boost collaboration—such as teacher teams, common planning

**Authentic PLCs spend the lion’s share of their time discussing and deciding the best way to teach concept X.**

...
while CFGs are still around today in concentrated areas in public education, their derivative offspring, PLCs, are much more widespread.

So now that teacher collaboration is the new norm, the questions we must consider are, What are teachers collaborating about? (DuFour, 2006) and How are they collaborating? (Venables, 2011).

Beyond the What and the When
If teachers are granted collaborative planning time during the school day, without guidance about how to use that time, most collaboration tends to be reduced to planning the what and the when—the scheduling and logistical issues that, as I’ve pointed out, often bog down teams’ productivity. This is better than not collaborating at all; it ensures some degree of solidarity about what teachers of a common subject are doing in the classroom. But it does little or nothing to help these teachers teach in the best and most effective ways possible. That conversation—the how we will teach it—is not embodied in conversations that hover in the what and the when stratosphere. For this, we have to dig deeper.

If PLCs are going to make a difference for kids and really affect student achievement, it goes without saying that at some point they must ask of each other, “How will we teach this?” Therein lies the impetus for real instructional improvement. But just asking how is still not enough. Teams need to be able to evaluate the instructional options available. What is the litmus test for deciding that one way of teaching a topic is better than another way of teaching it?

Of course, there are no hard and fast rules, but the rubric I created (see fig. 1 on p. 40) can help teachers assess the potential value of any particular learning activity. Teacher teams can use the rubric as a guidepost to discern learning activities that may look good on paper (or on the internet) from those that are actually good in practice.

When teacher teams use this rubric to discuss a learning activity or lesson they are planning to try with their students, I have consistently witnessed several advantages: (1) the learning activity is analyzed much more deeply and done so on the basis of things that matter (alignment to standards, impact on learning, and so on), (2) the meeting tends to be highly focused with few, if any, divergent discussions, and (3) the discussion produces as its most valuable reward a collective understanding of what these teachers mean by rigor or student engagement or other such terms. This is what I call constructing community knowledge, and its value and reach extend far beyond the merits of a single learning activity scored with the rubric and into every future conversation the PLC might have involving these lesson characteristics (Venables, 2011).

Collaborative Analysis of Teacher Work
There is a push in education these days to look at and analyze student work in order to make decisions about what teachers are doing or should be doing in the classroom. This is a good thing; after all, student work produced as a result of instruction is the ultimate artifact in determining if the instruction was effective. This represents a wonderful paradigm shift from days in which “coverage” of the material was the focus rather than learning of the material. This paradigm shift reinforces the popular adage that “if it wasn’t learned, it wasn’t taught.”

However, although looking critically at student work should be an essential part of any PLC, it is largely a reactive endeavor insofar as it is an analysis of what has already taken place: the teacher has taught, the students have produced work. By looking at teacher work before
FIGURE 1. Learning-Activity Planning Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alignment to Standards</td>
<td>Barely aligned or not aligned</td>
<td>Somewhat aligned</td>
<td>Mostly aligned</td>
<td>Completely aligned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on Learning</td>
<td>Low impact</td>
<td>Medium-low impact</td>
<td>Medium-high impact</td>
<td>High impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Engagement</td>
<td>Low engagement for most students</td>
<td>Moderate engagement for some students</td>
<td>Moderate engagement for most students</td>
<td>High engagement for most students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depth of Knowledge Level</td>
<td>Recall</td>
<td>Skill/concept</td>
<td>Strategic reasoning</td>
<td>Extended reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology Integration</td>
<td>No integration of technology</td>
<td>Some integration of technology</td>
<td>Effective and prominent integration of technology</td>
<td>Effective and innovative integration of technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Friendliness</td>
<td>High-maintenance (lots of materials and prep work)</td>
<td>Low-maintenance (few materials or little prep work)</td>
<td>Students think</td>
<td>Students think and work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigor and Relevance</td>
<td>Teacher works</td>
<td>Students work</td>
<td>Students think</td>
<td>Students think and work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation</td>
<td>Not suited for differentiation</td>
<td>Suited for differentiation with fairly significant modifications</td>
<td>Well suited for differentiation with minor modifications</td>
<td>Well suited for differentiation as is, with natural tiers built in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time-Benefit Analysis</td>
<td>Too much instructional time required for relatively little learning</td>
<td>Questionable amount of time required for expected amount of learning</td>
<td>Amount of time required and amount of learning are commensurate</td>
<td>Small amount of time required for amount of learning that exceeds expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections</td>
<td>No connections to previous or future standards or to other subjects</td>
<td>A few genuine connections to other standards or subjects</td>
<td>Genuine connections to other standards and/or subjects embedded in various components</td>
<td>Strong, authentic connections to previous and future standards and to other subjects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For each time PLCs review and analyze student work, they should review and analyze teacher work twice.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

Do your PLC meetings tend to focus more on logistics—what will be taught and when it will be taught—than on how a lesson or activity will be taught? If so, how could you make the switch?

Venables suggests that for each time PLCs review and analyze student work, they should review and analyze teacher work twice. How could you make teacher work the focus of your PLCs?

Work with your team to analyze a learning activity against the included rubric. Could the rubric be a helpful tool for future PLC meetings?

References


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Daniel R. Venables is an education consultant and founding director of the Center for Authentic PLCs and the Grapple Institutes. He has authored multiple books on PLCs including How Teachers Can Turn Data Into Action (ASCD, 2014) and Facilitating Teacher Teams and Authentic PLCs: The Human Side of Leading People, Protocols, and Practices (ASCD, 2018). Follow him on Twitter @authenticplcs.
Teach to Lead is a joint effort of ASCD, Teach Plus, and the U.S. Department of Education designed to elevate and support teachers in leading locally driven innovations to improve teaching and learning. Since 2014, Teach to Lead has had direct involvement with more than 8,000 educators from 48 states and partnered with 175 supporting organizations.

The project hosts summits at which teacher-led teams collaborate on problems of practice they’ve identified and—with the help of a logic model and a critical friend from a Teach to Lead supporting organization—develop an initiative that will spur fundamental changes in their school, county, or state. The goal is to position teachers to play a more central role in developing policies and frameworks that affect their work, without their having to leave the classroom.

More than 450 Teach to Lead teams are now active in U.S. school systems. EL recently asked four of these successful teams to reflect on one thing that helped them work together effectively and one obstacle they’ve had to overcome.

Project: ¡Sí Se Puede!
Richland School District Two, Columbia, South Carolina

Nathan O’Neill (team leader), Title III and ESOL program compliance administrator; LaChe’ Williams, 5th grade teacher, Conder Arts Integrated Magnet School; Ron Huff, Hispanic family liaison; Donna Teuber, innovative program designer.

¡Sí Se Puede!’s mission is to equip our district’s staff and empower its families to ensure Latino students’ success. We are a broad collaboration of district teachers and staff who banded together around the common goal of supporting our growing Latino community. We began through a district “innovation incubator” in 2014 and were chosen to participate in the Baltimore Teach to Lead Summit in February 2016. Some of ¡Sí Se Puede!’s key initiatives have been Fiesta Conexiones (a back-to-school bash for Spanish-speaking families), A Day in the Life (in which administrators shadow a Newcomer English learner through a morning at school), our Student Interpreter program, and our “Welcome Wagon,” which trains front office staff members in being
Lessons from Teach to Lead

The hallmark attribute every member of the team brings to our teamwork is a selfless passion to serve our Latino students and families. Team members—coming from diverse personal and professional backgrounds and already having a great deal of responsibility with their “regular jobs”—show a lot of heart and dedication to the mission. Being willing to join after-school planning meetings, communicate across Google Docs to plan initiatives, and put in extra time to pull off events shows the degree of passion each member shares. It is awesome to watch our team rally together, bringing individual talents for the good of the whole.

Being a part of the summit in Baltimore was amazing, and Teach to Lead’s logic model helped us get ideas onto paper. But for our team, the best facet of Teach to Lead came when we were chosen to host a Leadership Lab in our district in fall of 2016.

The attribute every member of the team brings to our teamwork is a selfless passion to serve our Latino students.

“Si Se Puede! team member Ron Huff with a group of trained Student Interpreters.”

Lessons from Teach to Lead

Four educator teams on taking their school-improvement ideas from spark to reality.

empathetic and using resources like Google Translate to connect with multilingual families.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NATHAN O’NEILL
Leadership Labs are daylong meetings intended to expand the progress of a Teach to Lead team by bringing together key partners who help advance that team’s action plan. A Lab spurs connections between teachers, local stakeholders, and supportive organizations; participants share best practices and commit to helpful actions.

Representatives from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, the U. S. Department of Education, and ASCD worked with us in planning our Lab and helped us orchestrate the daylong event. Their support was invaluable in helping us invite the right people to hear about ¡Sí Se Puede!, clarifying our presentation’s pitch, and strategizing how to engage the participants in ways to help move our mission forward. This excellent day of networking helped us make deeper connections with district and regional groups and gain more ideas about where to go in the future.

One of our biggest obstacles has been team member turnover. Since 2014, the team has shifted many times over as team members have come and gone for professional and personal reasons. Keeping a “sense of team” has been a challenge. But we’ve always been fortunate to be able to draw in a powerful handful of teachers and staff who leverage their time, talents, and passion to ¡Sí Se Puede! They’ve made an immeasurable impact on the lives of Latino students and families.

Project: Real Talk—Empathy Interviews

Chicago Public Schools, Chicago, Illinois

Mark Janka (team leader), English teacher and sophomore team lead, Michele Clark Academic Prep Magnet High School; Melissa Resh, assistant principal and STEM director, Lake View High School.

Our team’s goal was to get Chicago-area school and district leaders to use empathy interviews. Such interviews aim to understand a “user’s” true needs. If we conceptualize leadership as a “product,” these interviews ensure that leaders address the true needs of those they lead (the “users”), not just the needs the leaders perceive. Empathy interviews allow administrators to drive school improvement by unlocking often-overlooked expertise and institutional knowledge. They have the potential to build trust, uncover issues within a school, and strengthen teacher buy-in for initiatives.

Chicago Public Schools breaks the city into “networks” as a way to distribute leadership, management of initiatives, and school supports. These networks have tended to function as a mechanism to ensure compliance for well-intended (but sometimes imprudent), top-down initiatives. We hope to have network leaders use empathy interviews to collect “data” from teachers, students, and other stakeholders more systematically so they can gain perspective on and support bottom-up initiatives, not solely top-down directives. While all people at the school level have useful insights that can be revealed in empathy interviews, we place particular emphasis on teachers because they are closest to the actual work of educating children.

The one thing that has made our collaboration work was, absolutely, trust. That trust permeated our work on many levels. It started as the trust between the two of us on the team to be able to give and receive critical feedback and
keep the heart of the work at the forefront of our decisions. Then it was trust that if we did this project, even on a small scale, we would make a difference in teachers’ and students’ lives. Finally, we had to trust that we had an idea that was good and would improve the field.

The Teach to Lead Summit was critical in supporting our progress. The summit elevated our own belief in the power of our idea; it gave us protected, dedicated time to work on it; and it allowed us to get feedback from people outside our circles, which meant we could be honest without the worry of political ramifications.

One obstacle was the real possibility that teachers’ voices would remain secondary in activities connected to our initiative. Melissa, an assistant principal, is a natural leader; when she speaks, people listen. That and the fact that she has administrator status meant that if we weren’t careful, this project—which is explicitly about elevating teacher voice—could turn into non-teachers (administrators or representatives from, for instance, the central office) speaking mostly to one another about the importance of teacher voice! This dynamic is so heavily embedded in the culture of education—even in areas specifically carved out for teacher leadership—that teacher input can be overlooked. We had to be vigilant to gauge whether this was happening in spaces where we shared our ideas.

Fortunately, Melissa is a thoughtful leader and collaborator, known as a champion of respecting teacher voice among leaders in our district. If Mark felt like things were out of balance, he asked Melissa to have side conversations with him. Checking in about the balance of input and voice was an important part of our process.

We’ve been fortunate to draw in a powerful handful of teachers and staff who leverage their time, talents, and passion.

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**Project: EngagED—Professional Development That Works!**

**Chico Unified School District, Chico, California**

**Becky Brown** (team leader), administrator of special projects, Butte County Office of Education (former English teacher at Inspire School of Arts and Sciences); **Danielle Reynolds**, math teacher, Inspire School of Arts and Sciences; **Kathyleen Bishop**, social science teacher, Chico High School; **David McKay**, principal, Bidwell Junior High School (former director of secondary education for Chico Unified School District).

In April 2016, a team from Chico Unified School District (CUSD) traveled to New Orleans to be part of a Teach to Lead Summit. Danielle Reynolds and Becky Brown, teachers from Inspire School of Arts and Sciences, had been leading a grant-funded project called EngagED, which focused on putting teacher leadership at the core of instructional improvement. They hoped Teach to Lead could help them sustain this work. Once our Teach to Lead application was accepted, our team of Chico teachers and administrators began discussing ways to
level-up the work of EngagED for all teachers in the district.

During the summit, we used the logic model to articulate a problem statement that began, “In Chico Unified School District, our current professional development system inadequately prepares teachers to engage socioeconomically disadvantaged students...” and noted that our teachers lacked access to time, resources, and collaboration with colleagues to learn strategies for reaching these students. We developed a clear vision for solutions to the problem and identified the who, what, when, and how of accomplishing that vision over two-plus years.

Two key things helped our team work together: (1) We had honest conversations in which team members made room for differing perspectives, assumed positive intent, and persisted in creative problem solving; and (2) we combined a big-picture vision for the project (what team member Dave McKay calls our “intriguingly grandiose” vision) with small-scale steps to achieving that vision. Our vision was to put in place a structure for professional development for all teachers at all sites in CUSD, providing opportunities for teacher leadership, meaningful collaboration, choice, structured time for discussion, and peer observation and feedback.

A potential obstacle to teamwork surfaced when the team was chosen to develop a Leadership Lab at which all administrators in Chico Unified would hear EngagED’s vision for transforming professional learning and would brainstorm ways to make that vision a reality across district sites. To make this event happen, we had to gain buy-in from the superintendent and other administrators. One obstacle to convincing this larger group to join the project was “initiative fatigue.” District leaders worried that teachers and site administrators were going to view this as just one more thing to fit on an already full plate.

To clear this hurdle, the team built time into planning meetings for deep discussions around how the project would sustain the most effective elements of past initiatives and integrate these toward a common purpose. These discussions helped the team arrive at the conclusion that a structural shift would lead to a cultural shift—toward a culture in which teachers and administrators collaborate toward common goals, teachers take the lead, and all educators engage in the work of improving instructional practice.

Since the Leadership Lab, Ted Sullivan, the district’s director of elementary education, has carried out an improved structure for PD in our district. Positive changes include the development of a district leadership council that includes five to seven teachers and that’s meant to include teacher voice in districtwide decision making, and districtwide teacher development days that give attendees greater choice in learning options.

Through our work, we’ve realized that when greater trust occurs between teachers and administrators and when teacher leadership is at the core of positive change, great things happen for students. For changemakers, the hardest part of making positive transformation happen in education isn’t shifting structure, policies, or procedures, but shifting beliefs and values. While our “intriguingly grandiose” vision is still a work-in-progress, this mindset shift is happening for us.

“Honest conversations, in which team members made room for differing perspectives, helped our team work together.”
Our team is passionate about increasing social-emotional learning (SEL) skills for young children. School data confirmed SEL skills as a need for our students, many of whom also have diagnosed disabilities or are English language learners. We joined the vision of our original team leader (who is no longer involved) to build a framework called U.N.I.T.E., which stands for Understanding the Needs of Inclusive Teaching Environments. The framework integrates SEL into our science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM) instruction, and into our existing early childhood curriculum and schoolwide behavioral and educational initiatives. We hoped to combine the various curricula and initiatives, and the SEL component, housing them on an interactive electronic platform. This shared vision—coupled with constant communication and reflection through Google Hangouts, emails, and texts—was the foundation of our team’s success.

The Teach to Lead Summit we attended was intense. We didn’t know exactly how we were going to implement our idea before attending; the logic model and other tools helped guide us. One exercise our team did at the summit, the “Story Series,” was very impactful. This exercise helped us identify our “personal why”—why we are in teaching—by sharing a “story of self,” then looked at how that “why” was related to the project being proposed. We used this tool when we presented the SEL framework to the staff of Frances Fuchs, to build community, inspire colleagues to support this vision, and welcome everyone’s input.

Our colleagues each shared a “story of self” and then, in smaller groups, came up with a “story of us”—their group’s interpretation of the “why” of our whole school—and what we all collectively want our school to be. This created community and allowed staff to discover shared values and challenges while learning to navigate and use the platform.

The concept of U.N.I.T.E. has always been to bring people and ideas together. With this concept and our varied strengths kept in mind, we have always led collaboratively. This reliance on continuous collaborative work from all stakeholders is what makes our project sustainable.
Most of the teachers who will be working in your school five to ten years from now are already teaching there. It follows that you cannot produce the improvements needed in student performance unless you improve the teaching skills of your current teachers and fully support and make the best use of the new teachers you will eventually hire.

High-performing school systems in other countries do this routinely. But they don’t do it by “workshopping” their teachers or creating “professional learning communities” that are sometimes only a chance for teachers to talk about whatever’s on their minds while everything else in the school goes on much as it has in the past. No. High-performing jurisdictions like Shanghai in China, many Canadian provinces, and Singapore have transformed the workplace for teachers, changing it from an industrial-era workplace in which teachers are often treated like unskilled laborers into a place that feels

Marc Tucker

In top-performing school systems in other countries, teachers operate more like the professionals they are, solving problems in working teams.
like the kind of environments in which doctors, attorneys, architects, and engineers work (Callahan, 1964; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

But wait a minute, you say. My school isn’t like a factory or assembly-line workplace. You must be talking about someone else’s school. Despite impressions, however, most American schools are still organized pretty much the same way they were when the current education framework was created a century ago, when the mass-production factory was the model of effective organization. Each teacher is expected to teach her own classes for as many hours as possible while she is in the school, much like workers on an assembly line. Teachers can generally decide what goes on in their classroom, but the decisions beyond that are made by school administrators. If the administrators think the teachers need additional skills or knowledge, they can arrange to have someone give a workshop that teachers are required to attend.
In addition, just as in the old days, a teacher’s job today is pretty much the same on the last day of a decades-long career as on her first day. Compensation is based on hours worked and time of service. It has little to do with the quality of work an educator does or their contribution to improving the school’s effectiveness.

This description of teaching conditions closely resembles that of a turn-of-the-last-century blue-collar worker (Callahan, 1964).

A Better Way: Teacher Professionalism

In contrast, the model of school organization I’m about to share—the one used in top-performing international systems—is based on the business model used by firms that employ large numbers of professionals. Using this model makes sense for three reasons. First, top high school graduates won’t consider teaching as a profession unless they are treated as high-status professionals. Second, the teachers you already have will perform at levels that will surprise you if they are given a modern, professional environment in which to work. Third, the best new teachers a principal can hire won’t be able to do their best work unless they work in a place designed to take full advantage of their skill and ability. Here are some key elements of this model.

Teachers Spend More Time in Teams, Less Time Teaching

In contrast to the United States, where teachers spend nearly all their working time in front of students, teachers in high-performing countries spend only about half their time teaching (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). What are they doing the rest of the time? And how are they producing higher student achievement than...
we see in our system?

With few exceptions, most of which involve supporting struggling students, the majority of these teachers’ time is spent working in teams with other teachers. At any given time, a teacher might be leading a team developing a new lesson for the 9th grade math curriculum, working on another team assigned to make the whole approach to 8th grade integrated science more applied and hands-on, or participating with another team to analyze data on student absences.

The meetings of these groups aren’t talkathons or just opportunities for teachers to spend time together in a group hoping to learn. Each team has a serious, important assignment with deadlines. And each assignment is expected to result in improvements to student performance. Opportunities for teachers to move ahead in their careers depend in significant measure on the contributions they make, as team leaders and members, to the systematic improvement of their school’s performance. Their team contributions have a direct bearing on their career prospects, status, and financial compensation.

Top performers like Finland, Singapore, Hong Kong, and the largest Canadian provinces have discovered that engaging highly competent professional teachers in deliberately improving student performance pays large dividends. Indeed, schools in which teachers teach less and work together more produce much higher student performance than schools (like ours) in which teachers teach more and devote less time to such collaboration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Bear in mind, however, that this works only in schools staffed by well-educated, well-trained teachers. The parts and pieces of this design are well connected.

At this point, I can hear school leaders saying this model sounds all well and good, but most U.S. schools couldn’t afford to do it. It would cost too much to employ all the

So How Can I Start Making These Changes?

Suppose you’re a school leader interested in restructuring your school or district so that teachers can spend more time in teams.

● Start a conversation in your district about the issues I’ve raised in terms of how the work of the school is organized, who leads it, and how time is used. Create study groups involving the staff and the school board. Ask them to read this article and other resources describing top-performing systems in more detail.

● Once you have had discussions about these ideas, choose a strategy for moving forward. Many districts will want all their schools to start doing these things at the same time, but this could mean that you’re organizing the people who will resist these changes before potential supporters have shown skeptics that such restructuring will work. Talk with your school board about creating incentives for school faculties to start moving toward these new forms of organization. Incentives might include additional funds or autonomy from usual procedures and rules, including the right to hire teachers who meet certain qualifications (since this might mean going outside seniority provisions in contracts, the union would have to agree) and the right to restructure compensation and career ladders.

● Consider ways to find funding for these changes. One source is federal money earmarked for professional development of teachers. There are two other buckets: your district’s professional development budget from other sources, and the money you currently spend on salary increases based on the accumulation of credits for professional learning that teachers earn. Over the long haul, as more teachers decide to stay in teaching, districts will save money they now spend because of high turnover.
Top high school graduates won’t consider teaching as a profession unless they are treated as high-status professionals.

teachers required if classroom teachers began teaching less than half the time they are now. But in fact you wouldn’t need to hire many more educators, at least in large city and suburban districts, because you’d need fewer people in the central office. As the quality of your current and new teachers rises, these teachers would need less direction and specialist support of the kind that district offices typically provide. The district should be able to reassign some of the current central office staff to teach in the schools.

And you might also be able to get by with higher student-teacher ratios. The ratio of students to teachers is usually higher in the top-performing systems. Teachers everywhere would prefer to have fewer students, but the research is clear: It’s more effective to have teachers spend less time in front of students and more time working with other teachers to systematically improve instruction, even if that means larger classes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Research by OECD (2012) indicates that smaller class sizes aren’t necessarily associated with higher performance. And when teachers in the top-performing countries aren’t teaching class, working with other teachers, or observing colleagues, they’re often tutoring students who need extra help. This is another key factor in these systems’ ability to close performance gaps and raise the average achievement of all their students. So a school system faced with a choice between lowering class sizes and giving teachers more time to work together wouldn’t be misguided in going with the latter option.

Teachers Solve Problems Together

In a setting like a steel mill, when a new machine is being installed or a new technique implemented, frontline workers are taken off the line to attend a training in that new machine or technique. All training decisions are made by management. That mirrors the system of staff development in most U.S. schools, except that a fair amount of training in schools is unrelated to any reasonable criterion for what teachers need to know.

In the typical professional practice in the United States, such as law and architecture, however, the professionals are continually monitoring their field for new techniques, new research, new ideas, and new technologies that will help them do their jobs better. Professional development isn’t something you do when you’re not working at your job. It’s woven into the job itself.

Similarly, in the countries with the best-developed forms of modern school organization, the first thing an educator team does to tackle an identified problem is conduct a worldwide literature search on the issue. They might check in with university faculty and others with expertise. Then they report back to their teammates, and the whole team uses the research to kick off their planning for fixing the problem. As they plan, they include an evaluation component, specifying what data they’ll collect to measure how much progress they are making toward their goal. When they get the data, they change course as necessary. At every step in this process, team members are learning, sometimes at a breakneck pace.

But that isn’t the only faculty learning this system promotes. Teachers also frequently learn from one another. Take the development of a new lesson. After a team has done the research and completed its planning, the next step is to develop the lesson, which they do in team meetings. When the first iteration of this new lesson is done, one team member demonstrates it with a classroom full of students, while the rest of the team members sit around the edges of the classroom, observing and taking notes.
Then the team gathers to critique every detail of the lesson. They will do this for months, making the lesson better and better, tracking the data that shows what students experiencing that lesson are learning.

The international research team at National Center on Education and the Economy, the organization I founded, has watched lessons created in this way—and what we saw was simply stunning. In one primary school in Shanghai serving mostly low-income immigrant workers, we observed a 40-minute lesson in music theory. Among our team members was a graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music in Pennsylvania. Shaking his head, he said he’d never seen anything that could compare to the elegance and clarity of this lesson or the degree to which these students were able to quickly and completely grasp such complex topics in music.

In such a school, teachers are in each other’s classrooms all the time. In some top-performing systems, teachers who want to go up the career ladder must log a minimum number of hours every year observing coworkers’ classrooms. This says something about the school systems’ attitudes toward teacher expertise. Another important criteria for going up the ladder is the degree to which other teachers choose to observe a particular colleague’s classroom. The people who run these systems realize this is an effective measure of the regard in which a teacher’s colleagues hold her or him.

In the United States, however, principals often think they need to bring in an “expert”—by definition, not a teacher—to give a workshop. According to data from OECD’s Teaching and Learning International Survey, half of the American teachers surveyed said they had never observed other teachers’ classes or provided feedback to them (OECD, 2014).

Think of schools in these other systems as learning organizations, places in which teachers are learning all the time—like the students, but also like high-status professionals all over the world. Career ladders provide a strong incentive to keep learning. And the way the school is organized provides multiple ways to learn, from diving into the literature to observing first-rate teaching, to working with a mentor. In the Shanghai system, for instance, every teacher has a mentor. The message is that no matter how good you are, you can always be better. Which, as it turns out, is similar to the approach of top ballet dancers, actors, and baseball players. Even the best have coaches.

“Half of the American teachers surveyed said they had never observed other teachers’ classes or provided feedback to them.”

Accountability Is Lateral
In the industrial age, frontline workers were accountable to the foreman, who was accountable to his supervisor, and so on up the chain to the CEO. But in professional service firms, the organization is more complex. There are still supervisors, and the people they supervise report to them, but professionals are also accountable to each other in important ways. In a law firm, if the legal researcher gets the research wrong, the litigator can lose the case. In a hospital emergency room, teams depend at every moment on the other team members; if the anesthesiologist screws up, it hardly matters what the surgeon does. Engineering projects are carried out by groups of pros who are highly interdependent.

In all these cases, everyone knows who is responsible for what and everyone knows who’s doing his or her job—or not. If you aren’t competent—or are just plain lazy—everyone knows it and no one wants you on their team.
Sociologists who study organizations call this lateral accountability.

In the top school systems I’ve been describing, there is a lot of lateral accountability. If no one wants to observe in your classroom, you are in trouble. If no one wants you on their team, you are in trouble. In schools that have structures conducive to collaborative professionalism, two important things are true. First, everyone knows a lot about the competence of all the teachers, because teachers are in each other’s classrooms and on each other’s teams all the time. Second, everyone on the team depends on all the other members to get the work done.

In a system with strong lateral accountability, the system’s performance isn’t so dependent on vertical accountability to reach organizational goals. So let’s ask ourselves what kind of accountability we want for teachers. If we want schools in which some teachers cover for extremely weak team members even when they are not doing the job—because they feel teachers should stick together at all costs—then by all means let’s stick with a system in which all the accountability runs from the frontline worker to the supervisor. But if we want schools in which the faculty works actively to help the principal bring in strong teachers—and ease out weak teachers—let’s work for a system with strong lateral accountability.

**Glowing With Pride**

The rewards to school leaders for creating professional workplaces for teachers will go far beyond the continuous learning teachers will do and the expertise they will develop as a result. When teachers are treated the way high-status professionals in our society are treated, they will glow with pride instead of telling their own children to go into some other occupation, as they often do now. Many of our best high school graduates will choose teaching as a career, and they will want to stay in teaching as long as most of our engineers want to stay in engineering instead of bailing out, as too many teachers do. They will go the extra mile out of pride and commitment, rather than retreating to doing only what they have to because the system has beaten them down. They will do their very best—and their very best will be very good.

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**References**


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**Marc Tucker** is founder and former CEO of the National Center on Education and the Economy and the author, most recently, of *Leading High-Performance School Systems: Lessons from the World’s Best* (ASCD, 2019).
Let’s face it. Teachers today are time-pressed, and ASCD’s Quick Reference Guides (QRGs) feature expert instructional tips and infographics for fast, easy reference for teachers on the go. We invite you to use these relevant and up-to-date guides for study groups or individual learning. More pleasing to the eye, these smart designs resonate with teachers and get shared among peers.

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Managing Your Classroom with Restorative Practice

Dominique Smith, Douglas Fisher, and Nancy Frey

The goals of restorative practices are twofold: 1) build and maintain relationships and 2) repair relationships that have been harmed. Restorative practices create a respectful classroom, develop rapport with students, manage conflicts, and establish routines and expectations for positive student behavior.

Everyday Vocabulary Strategies

Marilee Springer

Increasing students’ vocabulary is vital to their literacy success. In this guide, you will find strategies, games, and classroom essentials you can use to create vocab lesson plans that are both exciting and effective.

Fostering Student Voice

Russ Quaglia and Kristine Fox

When students have a voice, they are motivated to learn, exhibit greater self-worth, are meaningfully engaged in learning, and have a greater sense of purpose. This handy guide provides the four-step process for fostering student voice based on years of fine-tuned research.

Buy in bulk for your entire team and save!
Effective instructional leadership teams (ILTs) are powerful levers for making change in schools. These teams typically include the principal, assistant principal, instructional coaches, teacher leaders, and other school leaders and can provide a systematic way for schools to execute their most important priorities. However, their effectiveness is not a given. Over the nearly two decades that I’ve been supporting ILTs, I’ve seen that despite educators’ best efforts, many initiatives in schools fail due to poor execution. Unfortunately, good intentions are not good enough when it comes to driving and sustaining growth.

Effective ILTs are intentional in many ways, including how and why they are organized, facilitated, and supported. When these components are purposely woven together, the complex fabric of an effective meeting and team is truly present. Let’s unpack each of them briefly.

**Component 1: Intentionally Organized**

Determining who serves on the ILT, when and where they will meet and for how long, and the goals and objectives of the meetings are all part of the intentional organization of an ILT. These actions are just good practice. But that doesn’t mean they are easy to implement.

First, it’s important to note that the team composition can be dynamic. There’s no requirement that says once on the team, always on the team. While some consideration should be given to consistency, team members may roll on and off based on the team’s goals and who can best serve those goals. Team size can vary depending on school size, but we typically see between five and ten members on an ILT.

Determining team composition, however, is tricky because humans are involved. Consider bringing in a mix of visionaries, those who generally take a long-term view and naturally think about sustainability, and integrators, those who are great at getting things done by tackling issues daily, keeping people...
How to structure ILTs to be more focused, disciplined, and accountable.

disciplined and focused, and translating big ideas into action.

There will inevitably be people in the building who will ask, “Why wasn’t I selected to serve on the ILT?” Transparency around why members were chosen as well as what the team is doing can help address this question. Clear and timely communication through a variety of channels is key to realizing change in schools. Besides sharing updates in staff meetings and weekly emails, make connections to your work during hallway conversations and in PLC meetings and coaching sessions.

As for the gatherings, the nature of good meeting agendas and structures can be a bit deceptive. Many ILT meetings become mired in a “rabbit hole” of problems. Without a clear structure to keep the team focused, these meetings can quickly devolve into hour-long “problem-naming” sessions without a clear process for prioritizing the most important problems to discuss. One middle school in Indiana that I had the opportunity to support was struggling with these very issues, and the ILT felt like their meetings were unproductive. After careful consideration, they adopted the 5-Star Meeting protocol, a framework developed by the Insight Education Group, my organization, that emphasizes personal and professional connections, individual contributions, lively team discussions focused on the most important issues, and an honest evaluation at the end of the
meeting that allows the team to identify specific ways to improve collaboration from one meeting to the next. The 5-Star Meeting protocol provided decision-making structures that resulted in clear next steps and owners. This ultimately increased productivity and brought a disciplined cadence to the team’s meetings.

When the team was first introduced to this intentional meeting structure, they thought it would be relatively easy to use. However, they not only needed to learn the mechanics of the agenda, they also needed to learn how to effectively interact with one another. This is where intentional facilitation is critical.

Component 2: Intentionally Facilitated

Effective ILTs require strong yet agile facilitation. Certainly, a well-organized agenda and meeting protocol can help with strong facilitation, but there has to be room for flexibility. ILTs often deal with complex, adaptive challenges such as how to more effectively support a teacher or group of teachers, how to create a stronger culture of learning in a school, or how to more effectively engage parents as partners in the learning process. These adaptive challenges often require changes in values, beliefs, roles, relationships, and approaches to the work. Solutions to such challenges often require experiments and new discoveries. A skilled facilitator must find ways to keep the team motivated when an attempted solution yields poor results and redirect them to find another possible solution without losing momentum. Therefore, it is critical to create a safe space in which team members feel empowered to learn and grow together by engaging in conversations, innovating in their work, and experimenting with new approaches.

While there is no one “right” way to facilitate an ILT meeting, here are a few common practices that I’ve used and that I’ve seen ILT facilitators use to ensure effective meetings.

- **Start and end on time.** Being disciplined about starting and ending on time not only shows respect to those who always arrive on time, but also contributes to the culture of efficiency that’s important for meetings.
- **Use personal/professional check-ins.** Never skip these! This brief exercise deepens the human connection and enhances the team’s ability to trust, support, and collaborate with one another. The check-in is quite simple: The facilitator asks each team member to share a personal or professional “best” from the previous week (or a brief challenge). Every team member participates to set the tone that all voices are important. Good books, new movies, binge-watch worthy shows, proud parenting moments, and coaching breakthroughs are often shared during the check-in.
- **Push thinking through questioning.** Nobody likes a know-it-all. Use questioning to seek diversity of thought and draw people out. Smart questions are often harder to pose, but more productive, than just telling the team your own thoughts or answers. After all, if you already have the answers, why meet as a team? Some of the best questions are the simplest: What is the potential upside and downside of a proposed solution? What challenges can we anticipate and how can we mitigate these challenges? Questions like these encourage the team to “push on” or pressure-test possible solutions.
- **Confront issues and address challenges.** Meetings should be about solving problems, which first requires naming a problem. This alone can be unpopular because “problem namers” can sometimes be perceived as negative, thus causing others to disengage in a meeting when negativity is introduced. Creating an ILT culture that views problem naming as essential to its work is critical. When naming a problem, try phrasing it in the form of a question that, if the team answers, will result in positive movement toward solving the problem. For example, rather than just saying, “Our Algebra I scores are terrible,” ask, “What can we do to improve Algebra I scores for our cohort of 9th grade students?” Framing the problem as a question inherently makes the issue more positive, solvable, and specific—three key criteria to use when confronting issues and addressing challenges.
- **Engage all members.** As with pushing thinking through questioning, it is important
to engage all members of the ILT to encourage diversity of thought, which will lead to a more robust conversation and ultimately a better solution. Engaging all members doesn’t just happen when the ILT meets; it should also happen before the ILT is formed (when thinking about who will provide a diverse, productive perspective) and in between meetings (by being thoughtful about each person’s role in next steps and “to do’s”).

- **Give context and examples when offering suggestions or raising an issue.** ILT members gain confidence in a possible solution by trying or modeling it in multiple contexts. For example, imagine the ILT is struggling with the utilization of academic vocabulary across multiple content areas and classrooms. Rather than simply identifying a strategy for teaching academic vocabulary and requesting that all teachers use it, the ILT can view the challenge through the lens of multiple contexts. What would the strategy look like if used in multiple grade levels and content areas? By testing a strategy in different settings, possible flaws will be elevated for the team to address. This level of analysis often results in more robust, sustainable solutions.

- **Use graciousness, humor, and purpose.** These three attitudes speak to the human nature of our work. The field of education requires close attention to the feelings, hopes, struggles, and dreams of individuals. In an ILT setting, we must remember that each educator on the team needs to get something out of the meeting and not just contribute. Whether it be a simple thank you from respected peers on the ILT, a laugh or two with colleagues during the meeting, or having the opportunity to voice their purpose or “why” for being an educator, such actions can contribute to the personal and professional satisfaction of ILT members.

### Component 3: Intentionally Supported

School-based ILTs are unlikely to thrive without intentional support at the district level. That support should start with modeling. One of the best ways for district leaders to do this is to replicate the structures and components of effective ILTs in their own meetings. Central office teams that employ the same level of intentionality with the organization and facilitation of their meetings will be much better positioned to support the work of ILTs in the field. Central office teams will not only gain credibility at the site level by “practicing what they preach,” but they will also unearth the real challenges associated with leading effective team meetings. As central office teams problem-solve these challenges, they can share lessons learned with the ILTs they support.

A recent experience I had working with a large district in the Southeast taught me the value of such intentional modeling and support. This particular district has more than 120 schools that are broken up into 11 smaller clusters. Each cluster is supervised by an executive director (ED) in the central office. The EDs had identified a common challenge of improving the level of instructional and distributed leadership at their school sites and decided that improving the ILT structure would be a good way to address this challenge. However, it was clear that there were very different opinions about what an effective ILT looked and sounded like. With a bit of discussion, the ED team agreed to use a common meeting structure (the 5-Star Meeting protocol). They then applied the components of intentional organization and facilitation to their ED meetings, and a few key learnings emerged.

First was the importance of alignment. The EDs realized that they needed to be more
Defining good instruction is critical because it serves as the rudder for the school-based ILT.

and achievement desired? While such questions may seem basic, ineffective meetings can result from the lack of a clear definition of what great teaching looks like (e.g., instructional frameworks or “look fors”) or, if a good definition exists, a lack of focus on it. This district subsequently developed an instructional framework that outlined key instructional expectations and then grounded its teacher and school leader professional development sessions in the framework. This helped create a foundation for ILTs.

Defining good instruction is critical because it serves as the rudder for the school-based ILT. Without this rudder, the team will lack focus and experience meeting fatigue, since there will be no clear goal on which the team can focus. The team may choose to address poor literacy and other problems that emerged in their schools on a daily basis, but this “firefighting” mentality in many cases distracted them from focusing on the bigger picture.

They also learned that schools or districts must define what good instruction looks like, and ILTs must constantly refer back to this definition as their guidepost. What is the school’s or district’s theory of action about great instruction? What inputs will produce the types of learning how to position that problem in the context of a clear goal, such as 90 percent of students reading on grade level, the team will not be able to effectively set milestones.

Additionally, without a clear understanding of what good reading instruction looks like, the team will struggle to find possible strategies to address the problem. Therefore, it is critical to have clear outcome-based and input-based goals. The outcome-based goal, in this example, would be the level of reading proficiency to be achieved. The input-based goal would focus on a strategy or strategies that could be tested as a possible solution.

Bringing It All Together
It’s important not to forget that these three components must be viewed and implemented collectively rather than in isolation. When they are at work simultaneously, several positive things happen. First, meetings become much more focused. With a clear structure for identifying and discussing next steps and for solving issues, ILTs truly become the lever for making change happen. Second, the ILT meeting structure provides discipline to get the work done. There’s a set time and place to meet, members know their roles, and there’s a clear set of incremental goals to achieve. Third, these three components together provide a framework for accountability. With team members authentically engaged and invested in the process of change, they gain a clearer sense about their individual responsibilities to the work as a whole.

It’s been exciting to watch how instructional leadership teams with these components in place can help schools gain incredible traction on their biggest challenges—and experience the wins they’ve been seeking.

Jason Stricker is cofounder and CEO of Insight Education Group and cofounder of Insight ADVANCE. He has extensive experience as a teacher, instructional coach, chief academic officer, and consultant focusing on educator effectiveness and organizational change. Follow him on Twitter @StricktlyJason.
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Making Teacher TEAM MEETINGS Work for Teachers
Reflective exercises can help educators figure out what’s wrong with their meetings.

Jesse Kraft

Have you ever participated in a team meeting in which little was accomplished? Perhaps time ran out before work was completed. Or maybe the team got stuck on an agenda item, and the result was to create more work than they had before! How can schools restructure meetings so that they truly serve the team, and not the other way around?

I wrestled with this question regularly in my first years as an elementary school principal. I required each grade-level team to meet weekly to unpack the reading and math curricula, create common assessments, analyze student data, and share instructional ideas. Thanks to our professional reading and training, our faculty was well-versed in the tenets of professional learning communities, and we all saw the value in collaboration. But even though we had strong buy-in for why we should meet and what kind of tasks we should tackle together, I couldn’t say that our meetings were serving us well.

Far too often, I observed teams completing only part of their work, running out of time, and then telling each other to finish up on their own. “We’ll circle back to this at next week’s meeting,” they’d say, but by the next week, there was a new load of lessons to plan, data to analyze, or student issues to discuss. The pace of instruction would not wait for last week’s team meeting agenda.

It occurred to our school leadership team that we could sit back and have teachers continue to go through the motions of working as collaborative-learning teams or we could reimagine the way time was used in our meetings and make that time better work for us. As Rick DuFour put it, “We have always worked hard. Will we now choose to work smart?”

After much reflection with the leadership team and discussions with grade-level team leaders, I put forth the following guiding principles to help our school reimagine our weekly team meetings:

1. Work should get done at the meeting.
2. We must manage ourselves so that work gets done.

Visualizing Meeting Time

The importance of the first point was made crystal clear to me by an activity we required of all our grade-level teams when we began the process of reimagining our meetings. Our leadership team knew that our teams were not completing tasks at meetings, but we needed the teachers’ reflections to really diagnose the problem and generate incentive for change.

At each grade-level team’s next meeting, I gave each individual teacher a marker and a paper with a circle drawn on it. I asked them to turn the circle into a pie chart that represented how they spent time in a typical team meeting. But there could be only two categories on this pie chart: accomplishing work and creating more work. The teachers had
to divide their charts between these two areas, according to their personal perceptions.

After they finished their pie charts, the teachers displayed them in a central location for all to see. At each meeting, this was a powerful moment. All our teachers had the same general perception: We were making work for ourselves in meetings more frequently than we were getting work done. (One teacher’s pie chart, defying the instructions, even had a third section carved out marked “Wondering what we’re doing!”)

I then led the teams in a candid conversation about the state of our team meetings. During this group reflection, I asked, “How do we make it so that team meetings actually make your jobs easier?” The teachers shared their frustration about the sheer number of agenda items they typically had to address during a team meeting, including some that administrators felt were important, but that had low value for people doing the teaching. Instead, they wanted to use meeting time for more detailed instructional planning with their colleagues, who could help them make good ideas better and ensure that their pacing of lessons was consistent with the curriculum.

The leadership team agreed to proceed in that direction. From that point on, grade-level teams set aside their previous agenda formats for the formation of agenda items oriented around lesson planning. As a school, we also acknowledged that there would be difficulties ahead as we spent more time on some priorities and less time on some other items that were once mainstays on our meeting agendas.

Who’s Talking?
Deciding to refocus meeting agendas was a significant breakthrough for us, but there was more to be done. I knew that even with clearly articulated and improved meeting goals, unconstructive behaviors at team meetings could sandbag our work. One very real problem I had noticed at meetings was the tendency of some team members to dominate discussions, process information out loud too often, or go off on
tangents. These behaviors, though not ill-intentioned, could easily consume an inordinate amount of meeting time.

To address this problem, I again had all teams use another regular team meeting time to participate in a reflection activity. I once again gave each teacher a marker and a paper with a circle on it. This time, I asked them to create a pie chart that would be divided into slices according to “Who’s Talking?” at a typical team meeting. There could be as many slices as there were members of that team, but no names were to be written on the slices.

Once these charts were completed and displayed, we had another candid team discussion, this time about whether all voices were being heard in meetings and how teams could work more interdependently. Seeing many pie charts split into very unequal slices raised questions about whether quieter or more reserved team members were being drowned out at meetings. I steered the conversations to a discussion on how we needed active discussion at team meetings, but how unfocused talk could prevent us from accomplishing the practical goals we’d recently established.

These discussions ultimately led to new meeting protocols for the teams, which included pausing and paraphrasing what the previous speaker said before commenting, the use of participation chips for some dialogues, and taking turns among teammates in making the first comment or question on each topic.

**Sticking to Agreements**

There was one more step needed to actualize our new approach to team meetings. At the beginning of each new school year, team leaders were asked to lead a discussion with their teams in which they created working agreements for their time together (for example, “begin meetings at 9:05”; “resist side conversations”; or “put phones away”). The purpose of the working agreements was to ensure that the meeting time was productive. Every September, once these agreements were established, they were posted by each team for administrators to see. Unfortunately, as the year went on and teachers got busier and demands on teams grew, the agreements were usually forgotten and rarely revisited. Who has the time to circle back when your meeting agenda is already so full?

Since we had just reimagined what a team meeting could be, we now needed to reaffirm our commitment to our stated working agreements for meetings to ensure that teams operated efficiently. For example, if a team agreed to start at a certain time, they all needed to be there at that time. If they agreed to complete certain small tasks prior to the meeting, they all needed to do it.

To reflect on their working agreements, I had the teams use a “stinger” activity. All the members of each team gathered around a large poster that showed a vertical continuum of responses. At the top was “Oh Yes,” followed by “Sure,” followed by “Umm . . .” in the middle, and onto “Nah” and finally “No Way” at the bottom. This poster was laid flat on a table and team members examined it, each holding a token. I then read their working agreements one at a time (for example, “Agreement #1: No side conversations when we’re discussing an idea”) and asked them to drop their token on the poster by the response they felt best aligned with how well the whole team lived by that agreement. Once all team members’ tokens were on the continuum, the teachers stepped back and had a discussion on that agreement. Why were they seeing a certain level of negative response on that agreement? Was this agreement still important? If so, what could we do to make it a reality at our meetings? This exercise helped teams to decide which agreements they really needed, and then to focus on maintaining them.
Making Time
As you can imagine, the types of reflection activities we used to reevaluate our use of meeting time can be risky for teachers. The administrator or coach facilitating the activities needs to assure teachers that this information won’t be used against them, and the team members must have developed some trust in each other and the school leadership. We were fortunate to have these things in place. It was critical that we had made the underlying reason for the activities clear: We were going to make meetings serve our purposes, and we were going to accomplish more at meetings. This was a win-win—greater opportunities for focused planning at meetings would improve lessons for students and accomplishing more at the team meeting would lessen teachers’ load outside of the meeting. Having a strong “why” for the work helped everyone accept the need for change as serving a greater purpose.

As a result of our reflective work, there were significant changes to our team meetings. Agendas were shorter, but team members were more focused and engaged, so more work was getting completed. This created a sense of accomplishment among the teachers. The work at meetings more closely matched what teachers thought was important, giving the weekly team meeting the purpose it had lacked.

But I should also acknowledge that even though we have improved our meeting agendas and behaviors, we still rarely have enough time to accomplish everything! This will always be a challenge in schools. A recent Rand Corporation study concluded what has been obvious to teachers all along: “Few teachers reported sufficient time to collaborate with their peers.” Our jobs require constant execution of instructional plans, but our on-contract planning time is never enough. If you engage in this work of enhancing meeting processes, it’s important to know ahead of time that the improvements you succeed in making will not fully solve the time problem. There will never be enough time for teachers to accomplish all they need to at team meetings, but you can maximize what time they do have.


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Your team’s purpose could determine its process.

Zachary Herrmann

Adults in schools expend a significant amount of time and energy working in teams. Therefore, it’s worth taking the time to examine how we organize these teams and the extent to which they are designed to achieve their purposes.

One way to do this is to think about cooperative versus collaborative teams. Cooperative teams are those that aim to achieve goals more efficiently and effectively, while collaborative teams explore and solve problems that individuals alone cannot. While this may seem like a fine distinction, collaborative and cooperative teams should function in different ways, and while they aren’t mutually exclusive, they do serve different purposes, frequently require unique approaches, and experience conflict in different ways. Determining the end goal of your team’s purpose can help you decide if you’d be better served with a cooperative or a collaborative team. Your decision may have implications for your team’s membership, norms, and process.

All About Cooperation
As stated, cooperative teams, which are the most common in schools, aim to achieve everyday goals more efficiently and effectively. To do this, they share resources, coordinate joint efforts, work to improve processes, and build standardization and quality.
A school leadership team that mostly functions as a cooperative team may focus on improving current school practices. For example, let's imagine a school leadership team that hopes to strengthen its policies and practices regarding field trips. In this particular school, teachers must receive approval from their department chair or grade-level administrator before taking their students off campus. However, different administrators expect different levels of justification from teachers and use a different set of criteria to make decisions. As a result, the quality and value of field trips vary widely across the school. Furthermore, teachers from different departments and grade levels are subject to very different expectations for how to plan off-campus learning and provide appropriate communication to students, families, and caregivers.

To solve this problem, the team shares their current approval practices across departments and grade levels and creates a standard field trip approval process. The team then communicates this standard process to teachers. The team’s cooperative efforts have helped teachers, who now have clear expectations and guidelines. Students, families, and caregivers will also benefit from these improvements, as they can expect more consistency with how off-campus learning is planned and communicated.

An example of a teacher cooperative team might
be one created to ease the daily demands on the teachers’ time by sharing instructional resources such as lesson plans and curricular materials. Teachers on the team delegate tasks to each other to improve efficiencies, such as having one teacher photocopy materials for the entire team or having another teacher build a draft of an assessment rubric for the other teachers to use. Teachers work jointly to prepare activities and lesson plans, and grade student assessments together to ensure standard norms and practices are being used across classrooms. All of this activity has the potential to be mutually beneficial to teachers, the school, and the students they serve.

A successful school certainly relies heavily on a great deal of cooperation. Without cooperative teams, schools would be less efficient and organized, and individuals would be denied powerful opportunities to learn and benefit from each other. However, even with high levels of cooperation, there are still problems and opportunities that will remain elusive. While building a standard field trip approval process may create more consistency and improve efficiency, it likely won’t help the school grapple with more fundamental questions like, What role does off-campus learning play in our school’s instructional vision? or How do we use community resources to create rich and authentic experiences for students? While teachers who share resources may benefit from each other’s work, simply sharing lesson plans and materials likely won’t help teachers delve into issues like what sorts of learning experiences will engage the students they are most struggling to reach or gain ideas on how to build stronger relationships with their students. These questions require deeper inquiry and more extensive problem solving. Such questions are ripe for collaborative teams.

**The Big Picture of Collaboration**

Rather than just sharing resources or improving existing processes, collaborative teams explore complex problems, develop deeper understandings of the challenges and opportunities the problems present, and work to develop thoughtful solutions. To do this, collaborative teams often engage in a different set of activities than cooperative teams do. Rather than team members assuming they already know the problem, a collaborative team spends more time exploring the problem. It utilizes the experiences, perspectives, ideas, and insights of its team members to explore what’s really going on beneath the surface, and works together to create new approaches that don’t currently exist.

A school leadership team that engages in collaborative work, for example, may decide to focus on a troubling disparity that shows up on a school climate survey in the reported sense of belonging between...
students who identify as white and students who identify as black. The team might hold focus groups with students, reach out to families, enlist the support of teachers, review research, and look outside their school for models from schools that have faced a similar challenge. Through this process, the team may discover root causes that they had never previously considered, such as their current offerings of extracurricular activities, the racial makeup of the adults in the building, the racial and cultural competence of their staff, the curricular materials in particular subject areas, and the academic course-tracking practices of the school. Now, with this deeper understanding of the problem, the group can engage in the challenging work of devising a thoughtful set of actions to address these newly uncovered challenges.

Role of Conflict
In any team situation, conflict will inevitably occur. But collaborative and cooperative teams are likely to experience and react to conflict differently. In a cooperative team, conflict may more likely be seen as a detriment. It’s far easier to share resources and agree upon necessary changes to processes when team members share similar ideas, perspectives, and beliefs about the problem they are facing and the solution they should be pursuing. With dissenting opinions, alternative perspectives, or different fundamental assumptions, cooperative teams may struggle to realize some of the efficiencies for which they were hoping.

This is likely why we often see teachers cooperating with those with whom they already philosophically and practically align. For cooperative teams, conflict is likely to be seen as something to avoid, not something to welcome. In fact, some cooperative teams find ways to remove dissenting voices, because they can be perceived to be a problem for the team, rather than a resource.

Efficient members of cooperative teams make concessions or attempt to reach quick compromises to resolve conflict and keep the work moving along. Consider the leadership team attempting to build a standard field trip approval process. If their purpose is simply to create more consistency across the school, the administrators will most likely keep their focus on the mechanics of the process—proposal templates and timelines—and not address bigger questions, such as “What is the purpose of field trips?” In fact, if the team started to discuss their personal perspectives on field trips, they could very well surface significant disagreements that may be difficult to reconcile, and thus stall the actual progress they were making on the problem at hand.

Collaborative teams, on the other hand, often actively lean in to differences and explore the complexity of the problem. While a collaborative approach may not help a team reach a “solution” more quickly, members don’t forfeit the opportunity to collectively deepen their understanding of the problem. As they express their hopes and concerns, the team can start to visualize a more complete picture of the opportunity or challenge, and that picture grows even more comprehensive as additional voices are brought to the table. When and if conflict arises, these differences in fact fuel the team’s collaborative efforts. Solving complex problems requires learning, and we stand to learn the most from those who are different than us.

Building Teams
Before members of a team begin their work together, they should have a clear and explicit conversation about their purpose. This can be done by discussing what problem they are trying to solve or what opportunity they are trying to pursue. Once members are clear on the team’s purpose, they should re-examine whether the right people are at the
Rather than team members assuming they already know the problem, a collaborative team spends more time exploring the problem.

table. If the problem or opportunity they are pursuing is well understood and well defined, then the team should consider whether the current team members already have the insight, knowledge, and expertise to address the problem, and determine the types of cooperative activities that will support their efforts. These activities may include sharing resources, building systems to coordinate joint efforts, and finding ways to build efficiency or consistency.

On the other hand, if the problem or opportunity is less understood, ill-defined, and will likely require a great deal of learning, the team should consider whose voice is not at the table (but should be), and the types of collaborative activities that can support their work. Since collaborative teams don’t start their work with the assumption that they fully understand the problem, the team must ensure that its membership is inclusive enough to build a comprehensive picture of the problem or opportunity.

Furthermore, they must build norms that support collaborative work. Rather than immediately brainstorming solutions, the team must first investigate the problem. Rather than working to build quick consensus, the team should encourage divergent perspectives. Rather than assume they have the expertise to develop a solution, the team should seek widely for input and insight.

Far too many teams suffer because they lack a coherent identity that defines their role and purpose. In schools, where time is perhaps the most precious commodity, individuals can quickly grow weary and frustrated with teams whose purpose is unclear. A team member who sees the problem as complex but works within a primarily cooperative team may feel that the team is not digging deep enough into the real issues. A team member who wants to leap into action but is on a collaborative team may grow frustrated by team members who ask too many questions. Team leaders can support their teams by establishing clear expectations for the team upfront and reinforcing the norms that will support their work.

However, I should note that most teams are not purely cooperative or purely collaborative. The question of cooperation and collaboration is certainly not a question of either/or, but understanding the distinction can still be important in organizing team activities. Some teams may attempt to achieve multiple purposes and designate different structures and times for cooperative and collaborative purposes. For example, a team might choose to dedicate a standing weekly 45-minute meeting to its cooperative efforts where they share resources, provide each other with progress updates, and find efficiencies in their collective work, and also engage in two-hour monthly meetings dedicated to collaborative efforts, where they spend time exploring and problem solving around more complex challenges or opportunities. As always, the teams’ choices of issues on which they will focus their time and energy are an expression of priorities and values—and a fundamental question of the practice of leadership.

Intention and Focus

Schools must rely on both cooperation and collaboration to improve systems, solve problems, and fix inequities. However, understanding how cooperation and collaboration can be different, both in their purpose, their approach, and their relationship with conflict, can help educators assess whether they are approaching their teams with the right level of intention and focus.

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Anyone in a corporate recruiting department or in the trade industry will tell you: An essential skill needed for today’s working world is the ability to collaborate with co-workers. At Design39Campus—a public K–8th grade school with 1,100 students in the Poway Unified School District in San Diego—staff members not only strive to create learning experiences where students have opportunities to become good collaborators, we live collaboration every day ourselves. It’s part of our culture.

Design39Campus was intentionally designed by a select group of educators (five teachers and one principal) as a place where learning could take place in more flexible, learner-centered ways. The school opened in 2014 with a goal to “change the way we experience learning.”

One fundamental shift the school made was to redefine the role of the classroom teacher (whom we call learning experience designers, or LEDs). A goal of redefining this role was to create a culture of collaboration among teachers, to move from thinking about “my students” and “my class” (what we sometimes call an “ego-system”) to an “eco-system,” where all the school’s educators work collaboratively for all of its students. From the start, we redesigned structures for school

For a design thinking-based school in California, educator teamwork is at the very foundation of learning.

Megan Power

Above: A teacher and parent at Design39Campus use the design-thinking process to plan a project.
We had to break through the systems and ways of doing things that are standard in most K-12 schools.

A Tale of Two Teams

One morning I joined our 4th–5th grade team’s daily hour of collaboration time to pitch an idea for a new project—a collaboration with a school in Australia related to the use of drones to support efforts to prevent and fight California wildfires and Australian bushfires. Each of these teachers has a homeroom group of students, but they collaborate to plan integrated learning experiences for all our 4th and 5th graders. They regroup and “share” students, with the makeup of student groupings and which teacher(s) are helping each group depending on learning needs, kids’ interests, and other factors. The learning experiences they create encompass literacy, science, social studies, math, and students’ interests and learning choices; teachers connect each experience to an essential question. Collaboration time is used to plan both larger, big-picture integration strategies connected to essential questions and related smaller pieces such as an individual lesson.

On the morning I arrived, eight teachers sat around the table in their design studio, a space for adult learners to design learning experiences for students. Around the room were whiteboards and planning templates that the group regularly uses to capture members’ thinking as they go through the process of developing essential questions, integrating curriculum, creating opportunities for real-world applications of learning, and developing student agency.

What followed was almost like magic. The teachers began expanding on my suggestion to bring it to life for their students. One teacher searched online for articles to establish the purpose—the why—for the learning experience. Two others began looking at Common Core and Next Generation Science standards to find connections to the activities and lessons they were already building and ways to integrate science and language arts. One teacher, Stacey, started thinking about resources we have in our community (including people) that could support this experience, while Katie speculated on how teachers might connect this idea to students’ interests. The educators worked like musicians in an orchestra, each person elevating the work of the others as they shared...
thoughts and ideas. This was just one collaborative session at Design39Campus. Within this one hour, the educators in the room turned a small idea into the beginnings of a deep, integrated learning experience that would not only create opportunities for amazing learning, but potentially impact students’ world. The teachers on this team feel valued, trusted, and empowered to do their best work to benefit all their students.

The same day, in another design studio, a group of 2nd and 3rd grade teachers collaborated on their upcoming Shark Tank experience, where student groups would pitch their business plans to investors to get funding to create companies. The teachers discussed how student groups were doing with writing their pitches and offered suggestions on how best to support students that were having challenges. One teacher shared how she used a mentor text from Warby Parker, an eyeglass company skilled in storytelling, to model the kind of writing students needed to do, thus keeping the learning student-centered rather than teaching the specific writing skills without meaningful context. The team began building on this suggestion together for their own lessons.

Consider what happened here. Not only did both teams generate ideas for creating integrated learning experiences and supporting all their students, but multiple team members contributed to the discussion. They built one another’s capacity. Teacher collaboration like this doesn’t just happen. It doesn’t happen at Design39 simply because we have incredibly passionate teachers. Collaboration was an intentional part of the school’s design and is supported by structural and systematic changes we made when creating Design39Campus.

Doing School Differently
The Design39Campus began in 2013 with a small group of educators interested in creating a new learning environment using the design thinking process. With the help of our community—including parents, students, local businesses, and community members—we spent time empathizing with stakeholders in education, researching, and looking deeper to define the actual problem we were trying to solve and the

“It’s hard work changing the way we do learning in a public K–8 school.”

2nd and 3rd grade teachers collaborate on their Maker 39 entrepreneurial learning experience.
causes of that problem. From our research and listening to one another, we found that the current traditional model of schooling wasn’t giving learners the skills and dispositions to make an impact in our world today, let alone the world of their future—a serious problem. We determined that the traditional structures and way we “do school” needed to be completely redesigned, along with the perception and expectations of what “success” means today.

From there we continued to have our community help us form ideas, prototype, and test solutions that might work within this new school.

Our design team also considered our own beliefs about collaboration and student learning. We realized we shared the following beliefs:

■ By working together, we can achieve and create more than by working alone.

■ Each person has “super powers,” skills, and passions that they bring to a team. It’s important to value having different perspectives and cognitive diversity within a team, so team members can push their thinking and continue to grow as professionals and as people.

■ It’s important for us to make sure all students have access to our teachers’ different “super powers,” to eliminate the typical system of only kids in a certain teacher’s class getting the opportunity to benefit from that teacher’s gifts.

In essence, we believe the future is the place we create—and to do all of this, people have to work together.

Once we identified our beliefs and our desire to create a culture of collaboration that fostered student-led learning, we had to break through the systems and ways of doing things that are standard in most K–12 schools. One major shift was to try to eliminate “batching” of students by age and the siloing of subject areas. Our grade levels are grouped into three spans: Kindergarten through 3rd grade, 4th and 5th grade, and 6th through 8th grade. Teachers in the spans work together to design learning experiences and “share” students: Sometimes students work in their homeroom and at other times, a group from different homerooms (or just one student) will work with other teachers to learn in line with their particular interests, choices, or areas of need. Students work in flexible groupings that may last several weeks depending on the purpose and students’ needs. LEDs work with students to ensure they know when to switch to a different experience.

Building Teamwork into Our Day

Another shift had to do with time use. If we believed it was essential for teachers to be collaborating, we needed to create the time for this to happen. Without the ability to pay
“One fundamental shift we made was to create a culture of collaboration among teachers, to move away from thinking about "my students" and "my class."”

teachers for longer days or the personnel to “cover” students while their assigned teacher is meeting with his or her team, we had to creatively structure our teachers’ workdays. In our district, teachers’ contractual day began 30 minutes before school and ended 30 minutes after school. We realized that by putting the two half-hours together, we could carve out one hour of collaboration time every morning before students arrived at school.

This daily time has been essential in helping teachers design powerful, meaningful learning experiences. In our third year, things like IEP meetings, student drop-off supervision, and other meetings began to creep in and take away from this important before-school collaboration time. But because we see this time as an essential driver in the work we’re doing, we figured out ways to ensure it remained uninterrupted. The payoff has been richer student learning.

Visitors to our school tell us one of the first things they notice is the non-traditional design of our spaces. But after they’ve toured the school a bit, the novelty of that design fades and—as they converse with young and adult learners—what they notice is our culture of learning. Visitors often comment that everyone on campus views themselves as learners; they notice how articulate and excited our students are as they share what they are doing (and why) and reflect on their process for learning.

**Changing the Teacher’s Role**

To use this built-in collaboration time most effectively, we had to make another important shift—in the roles for our teachers. This included a change in terminology. If you want to change the way you think, you need to change the way you speak. The word *teacher* typically brings a specific image to people’s minds, but the role of a teacher today is shifting. No longer is the focus of good teaching mainly on delivering content. Rather, a good modern teacher is a designer of experiences. Teachers today aren’t expected to be experts in everything; they’re more often part of dynamic teams that combine their experiences, skills, and passions to help elevate all students’ learning.

Teachers at Design39 facilitate learning in a variety of ways, including teaching mini-lessons, supporting students with finding resources for learning experiences and projects, assessing students’ learning and skills—so they can be responsive to their students’ learning needs—and making connections to experts in different fields. For example, a teacher might bring in entrepreneurs to speak with students about branding and marketing for their student businesses. We’ve found the simple change of calling teachers *learning experience designers* has made an impact in teachers seeing themselves as professionals and has contributed to modifying how they work.

Often, we expect teachers to create environments that promote student collaboration, yet the environment teachers experience is the opposite of collaborative (think of workshops where a presenter talks about the importance of learning in engaging ways, all the while lecturing, modeling unengaging methods). We decided that if we wanted our students to work in a collaborative environment, then all staff members—from teachers to our administrative team—needed to work collaboratively. So, for example, in our Welcome Center, traditionally known as the school’s office, our administrators (whom we call design facilitators) work in an open space along with our administrative staff. This administrative team undertakes many tasks together—anything from student enrollment to traffic concerns. Adults in the school can better relate to students’ challenges in working on teams because they, too, are working through the challenges of collaborating effectively.

**Learning to Collaborate**

Collaboration is difficult. It’s not as easy as gathering teachers into a group to work together. Often in schools, collaboration becomes a time to discuss business, share activities, or make copies for each other. This reminds me of young children’s parallel play.

So how do you take a team beyond...
this stage to actually co-designing learning experiences for kids? You have to design structures and develop skills for teamwork in all learners, and these skills and structures need to be revisited frequently. We’ve learned that each time a new member joins a team, the team dynamics change, so teams need to re-examine their norms and how they work together often. We’ve also found that each of our teacher teams works differently, and each is at a different stage in their development of collaboration skills. Teams in the early stages tend to use most of their time discussing business items or sharing what they’re doing. More skilled teams use the time to focus on deeper student learning and designing learning experiences.

We have found that the most effective teams have these elements:

- A common purpose.
- Trust among team members.
- Good communication.
- A comfortable sense, for each team member, of their strengths, areas of growth, and what they bring to the team.
- Ways to manage a conflict and a tendency to assume others have a positive intent.
- Ways to have fun together.

We often forget that collaboration is a skill adults need to learn and practice. One way we develop these skills at Design39Campus is by training all our staff in Adaptive Schools Strategies by Thinking Collaborative, an organization that provides resources that teach collaboration skills. This training gives educators the skills and strategies to listen, understand, and communicate effectively within groups.

Taking It to the Next Level

Once you have structures in place that shift the role of the teachers while equipping them with skills for working together, teachers can collaborate at a higher level. They can begin not only designing meaningful, integrated learning experiences, but also supporting each other’s growth in meeting the needs of their learners. Teachers can then work more on supporting student agency and can tackle additional issues, such as creating learning competencies.

At Design39Campus, we understand that each child is on his or her own learning journey. We want our students to be able to progress and work at the level of learning that’s right for each of them, regardless of their grade level. So over the last five years, our teachers have begun to focus on developing specific learning competencies.

We look at learning competencies as having three parts: knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Developing these competencies in students across levels has led to increased conversation and collaboration between our grade spans, much of which takes place during morning collaboration time. We’re discussing things like, How can we best assess students and have them show proof of mastery? Should we assess students’ skills and dispositions? How can we—teachers and students—best communicate growth to parents?

Constantly Learning

Since its opening, our school has been continually learning and changing. Students and parents regularly give us feedback and help us redesign different parts of our system. Parents frequently share how their children love going to school. They notice the depth of student learning and are asking us to create a similar high school experience (which we’re looking into). Being a public school, we still need to participate in state testing. According to these traditional measurements of success, our students perform at or above our district schools—without any of the traditional test prep focus and practice.

We’ll continue to use the design thinking process as the school evolves. We by no means have figured everything out about how we want to change the learning experience of those on our campus. It’s hard work changing the way we do learning in a public K–8 school, but it is the right work. And the only way we can continue this work is by working together.

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Building Team Spirit

Highly effective teams do not let constraints get in their way. They go outside their comfort zones, use focused, goal-driven inquiry to improve an area of weakness, and make changes based on feedback.

—Jenni Donohoo and Steven Katz, p. 24

Teachers today aren’t expected to be experts in everything; they’re more often part of dynamic teams that combine their experiences, skills, and passions to help elevate everyone’s learning.

—Megan Power, p. 73

We reimagined our weekly team meetings with two guiding principles: 1. Work should get done at the meeting. 2. We must manage ourselves so that work gets done.

—Jesse Kraft, p. 62

Using humor in a low-stakes situation can help a group come up with playful ways to hold themselves accountable when it really matters.

—Kathryn Parker Boudett and Meghan Lockwood, p. 12