Issue Brief

“The Imperative of Collaboration from a School Improvement Perspective”

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The Imperative of Collaboration from a School Improvement Perspective

Over the last 30 years, many new programs have been introduced to help schools become more effective in improving student achievement. In today’s environment of high-stakes accountability, the demand for solutions by underperforming schools and districts under No Child Left Behind has never been more urgent. Nevertheless, identifying the most appropriate initiatives, as well as implementing them with high fidelity, presents a number of challenges to educators, whether they be central office staff, principals, or classroom teachers (Fullan, 2001). For example, decision-makers may encounter one or more of the following barriers during a program’s lifecycle:

- **Uncertainty**: Lack of necessary evidence of the effectiveness of the program;
- **Ambiguity**: Too many program options available, often with conflicting information and multiple possible interpretations; and/or
- **Stress**: Accountability demands coupled with the lack of time for adequate implementation and oversight.

To address these challenges, researchers, policy makers, and membership associations at all levels of education recommend collaboration among professionals as a powerful strategy for carrying out school improvement initiatives. For instance, the first standard listed on the National Staff Development Council’s web site (NSDC, 2001) asserts that “staff development that improves learning of all students organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district.” Among the citations listed for this standard is DuFour and Eaker (1998) who purport that “the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school personnel to function as professional learning communities” (p. xi).

By implementing team-based learning structures, commonly referred to as professional learning communities (PLCs), program staff can reduce (a) uncertainty by making use of more people with more diverse knowledge, (b) ambiguity by building consensus on what information is important for attaining school improvement goals, and (c) stress by sharing the responsibility for, and commitment to, program implementation and oversight.

Collaboration Defined

The primacy of collaborative teaming should come as no surprise to those in the profession, as PLCs are one of the most talked-about ideas in education today. If schools and districts are tasked with developing and sustaining PLCs to meet school improvement goals, then what do these structures look like? Perhaps the best way to construct an image of PLCs is to define collaboration and its essential components. Collaboration occurs when two or more entities come together for a reason–to share practices and to accomplish mutually desired outcomes that could not otherwise be attained as independent actors working alone (Gajda, 2007). The interaction takes place between organizations (strategic partnerships) and among groups of individuals within an organization (communities of practice). Multiple communities of practice (CoPs) form the basic building blocks of organizations (Peters, 1987), making organizations essentially “constellations of communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998). Figure 1 depicts a CoP constellation that might exist within a 40-member organization.

One of the fundamental principles of CoPs is that organizations, like the name suggests, are “organisms,” not chains of command. In this sense, decisions regarding practice are not made by one’s boss, employee manual, or outside consultants, but rather by cues taken from trusted colleagues (Rath & Clifton, 2004). These CoP leaders do not necessarily hold administrative titles or formal roles, but they are those to whom colleagues come for advice.
If one subscribes to the notion that all groups within an organization, whether formal or informal, are CoPs that are led by one or more leaders, then what processes do CoPs typically follow? The school improvement literature treats interpersonal collaboration as a cycle of inquiry that involves collective dialogue, decision making, action, and evaluation as its essential components (see Figure 2). Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, and Goodlad (2004) use the acronym “DDAE” as a shorthand reference to this process (see Boudett, City, and Murnane, 2005, for an example of this process in action). CoPs within an organization engage in this dynamic cycle to identify challenges as they arise, improve practices, and sustain those changes that are deemed effective.

Figure 1: Organizations as communities of practice (Gajda, 2007)

If minimal- or poor-quality collaboration only reduces a school’s capacity to positively affect student achievement, engagement, and performance” (Gajda, 2007). Gajda suggests that the ideal type of organization is one in which every person is a member of one or more high-functioning CoPs, such as professional learning communities, and all CoPs are linked by individuals who bridge the boundaries of levels or subject area concerns.

Figure 2: Interpersonal collaboration as a cycle of inquiry (Gajda, 2007)
School vs. Classroom-Focused CoPs

In the school improvement literature, CoPs typically comprise two types of teams: (a) groups of school administrators and other leaders who focus on overall school improvement processes, and (b) groups of teachers by department and/or grade level who work to improve classroom or instructional processes. Hickey (2006) differentiates between these two essential CoP types in Table 1.

Table 1: Differences between School and Classroom Improvement Processes (Hickey, 2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typical School Improvement Team</th>
<th>Classroom-Focused Improvement Team</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Process established at district level</td>
<td>Process designed at team level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linear and prescriptive</td>
<td>Non-linear/non-prescriptive Plan-Do-Study-Act model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual strategic plan</td>
<td>Short-cycle strategic plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact: Total school</td>
<td>Impact: Students in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-level team develops</td>
<td>Grade-level team develops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose: Meet AYP</td>
<td>Purpose: Adjust practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results determined end of year</td>
<td>Results determined when unit is taught</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School improvement teams as typically constituted are designed to do exactly what their name implies: improve the school (Hickey, 2006). They are not designed to improve instruction at the classroom level; that is the focus of grade-level teams or departments.

What can school leaders do to develop and support high-functioning CoP structures at the classroom level? Gajda (2007) suggests the following:

• Reduce required low-quality CoPs.
• Reconfigure CoPs to engage in high-quality DDAE discussion (e.g., with groups of teachers reviewing data at the end of every unit to identify enrichments and interventions for individual students).
• Ensure that faculty meetings have a purpose.
• Reduce the time for information dissemination during meetings.
• Change allocation of professional development time.
• Involve CoPs in program monitoring and evaluation of improvement processes.

Guidelines for Collaboration

Effective collaboration means moving teachers from broad aims (wanting all kids to learn) to specifics (learn what?), says Richard DuFour (cited in Pappano, 2007). His advice for making it work:

• Make student learning the center of collaboration: “Focus on the learner instead of the teacher.”
• At the start, insist that teachers spell out rules for collaborating, including individual responsibilities and distribution of work.
• Set goals that can only be accomplished by working together. “Without a goal, you are not a team,” says DuFour.
• Be certain goals are results oriented, not process oriented. For example, instead of deciding to do more hands-on labs, aim to raise fifth-grade science test scores by “X” percentage points, or to raise the percentage of A’s on final lab reports.
• Set a timeline and a means to measure progress. Administrators can help by creating a vehicle for teachers to check in and receive feedback.
• When conflicts arise, administrators must demand that collaborative work continue.
References


