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COMMENTARY

Five Keys to Effective Teacher Learning Teams

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The Obama administration's Race to the Top initiative is focusing more attention than ever before on teaching effectiveness, with federal funds tied to strategies that improve student performance. For school administrators, these additional requirements mean unprecedented responsibility for ensuring that teachers provide high-quality instruction that promotes the success of all their students.

One popular response calls for on-the-job learning opportunities known as professional learning communities—sometimes called learning teams—in which teachers collaborate to improve instruction. But there has been limited evidence to show that these initiatives actually work, or how to do them well.

In a five-year study of Title I schools, serving more than 14,000 students in all, our team documented the significant contribution of teacher learning teams that were part of a school improvement model we evaluated. Using a rigorous research design, we found that achievement rose by 41 percent overall, and by 54 percent for Hispanic students, after schools converted routine meetings into teacher learning teams focused on what students were struggling to learn. Demographically similar schools selected at the beginning of the study to serve as "controls" had no comparable achievement gains over the same five years. Schools in both groups were challenged by histories of low achievement, large numbers of English-language learners, and high percentages of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch aid.

This study and subsequent investigations identified five keys for creating effective teacher learning teams at the high school and elementary school levels:

- *Job-alike teams of three to seven teachers who teach the same grade level, course, or subject.* Teams with an instructional and achievement focus plus common teaching responsibilities collaborate more effectively. Unless teams share common teaching challenges, their members drift into broad discussions and make few improvements in the classroom. But when teachers choose a learning problem that their students share and jointly develop a solution, that focus binds and sustains the team. This may explain why reforms that pressure individual teachers to "innovate," but don't support job-alike teams, do not work as well, according to national surveys.
- *Published protocols that guide—but do not prescribe—the teacher team's improvement efforts.* In addition to guiding the team's work, the protocol creates recurring opportunities for teachers to contribute their knowledge, creativity, and skills. This is one reason a protocol-guided approach is rated positively by more than two-thirds of the teachers we worked with in our research.

An effective team protocol includes steps familiar to educators, including jointly identifying goals for student learning; finding or developing assessments of student progress toward those goals; adopting promising approaches to address the goals; planning and delivering lessons everyone tries; using classroom performance data to evaluate the commonly planned and delivered lessons; and reflecting on student gains to determine next steps.

- *Trained peer facilitators—point people—to guide their colleagues over time.* Because peer facilitators try out in their classrooms the same lessons as everyone else, they are uniquely and credibly positioned to model intellectual curiosity, frame the work as an investigation, explain protocol steps, and encourage the group to stick with a problem until it is solved. Peer facilitators free up coaches and content experts to act as knowledgeable colleagues rather than

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team leaders. Distributing leadership in this way also frees administrators to circulate and provide support and accountability for multiple teacher teams. As a group, facilitators, site administrators, and instructional coaches function as a leadership team acting together to assist the work of each teacher team. The role of peer facilitator can be shared, and members can rotate from year to year as capacity grows.

- *Stable settings dedicated to improving instruction and learning.* Both the teacher teams and the leadership team need stable settings in which to work if they're to improve achievement. Teacher teams need at least three hours each month dedicated to instructional inquiry and improvement, while facilitators need about two hours each month to develop strategies and plan for the ongoing assistance and leadership of teacher teams. Establishing, publishing, and protecting a calendar for these meetings is critical to helping schools become vibrant places of continuous learning for adults as well as students.

- *Perseverance until there's progress on key student performance indicators.* Whatever goals the teacher learning teams choose, it's critical that they stick with them until their students make progress on key performance indicators. It might be a grade-level or department concern, such as understanding unlike fractions or writing coherent paragraphs, or it might be a districtwide or schoolwide focus identified in assessments. Once they see tangible student gains, teachers are less likely to assume "I planned and taught the lesson, but they didn't get it," and more likely to adopt the more-productive assumption that "you haven't taught until they've learned."

A caveat: The five keys are critical, but the larger context of specific schools cannot be ignored, since that also determines the fate of learning teams. Our results indicate that teachers in highly challenged schools can—and do—make a difference in student learning and achievement. But our experiences also suggest that schoolwide factors, such as organizational capacity and stable building leadership that makes instructional goals a priority, are critical contributors to sustaining productive learning teams.

It's not just meeting as a team that makes the difference. Rather, it's how the teams use the time that's set aside to gradually and steadily improve lessons and instruction. Job-alike teams, peer facilitators, protocols, and stable settings create focused opportunities and build teachers' confidence that their efforts are paying off for their students. When that kind of work is sustained and supported, the promise of teacher collaboration is translated into achievement results.

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