

Work Together But Only if You Want To

We cannot waste another quarter century inviting or encouraging educators to collaborate.

By Rick DuFour



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Teachers work in isolation from one another. They view their classrooms as their personal domains, have little access to the ideas or strategies of their colleagues, and prefer to be left alone rather than engage with their colleagues or principals. Their professional practice is shrouded in a veil of privacy and personal autonomy and is not a subject for collective discussion or analysis. Their schools offer no infrastructure to sup-

RICK DuFOUR is an education author and consultant on the implementation of the professional learning community concept in districts and schools. © 2011, Rick DuFour.

port collaboration or continuous improvement, and, in fact, the very structure of their schools serves as a powerful force for preserving the status quo. This situation will not change by merely encouraging teachers to collaborate, but will instead require embedding professional collaboration in the routine practice of the school.

Sound familiar? These were the conclusions of John Goodlad's study of schooling published in *Phi Delta Kappan* in 1983. Unfortunately, these findings have been reiterated in countless studies from that date to the present. The reason for the persistence of this professional isolation — not merely of teach-



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ers, but of educators in general — is relatively simple. The structure and culture of the organizations in which they work haven't supported, required, or even expected them to collaborate.

Attempts to promote collaboration among educators inevitably collide with this tradition of isolation. Defenders of this tradition argue that professional autonomy gives each educator the freedom to opt in or out of any collaborative process. *Requiring* educators to work together violates their right as professionals to work in isolation and can result only in "contrived congeniality" rather than a true collaborative culture (Hargreaves 1991). Some critics of systematic collaboration even offer a conspiracy theory, arguing that any effort to embed collaborative processes into the school day represents an administrative ploy to compel teachers to do the bidding of others and demonstrates a lack of commitment to empowering teachers. Thus proponents of volunteerism greet any attempt to ensure that educators work together with the addendum, "but only if they want to."

I've searched for the dictionary that defines "professional" as one who is free to do as he or she chooses. I can't find it. I see references to occupations in which people must engage in specialized training in order to enter the field and are expected

to stay current in the practices of the field. I see references to expertise and to an expectation that members will adhere to certain standards and an ethical code of conduct. I simply cannot find any dictionary that defines a professional as someone who can do whatever he or she pleases.

PROFESSIONAL DOESN'T MEAN AUTONOMOUS

Time spent in collaboration with colleagues is considered essential to success in most professions. When professional airline pilots prepare to take off, they coordinate their work with air traffic control. If the tower informs a pilot that he or she is to move to runway 24L and be fourth in line for takeoff, the pilot does not, as a professional, have the autonomy to declare, "I prefer runway 25 and I refuse to wait." He or she is not merely expected, but is actually *required* to work interdependently with others to achieve the common goal of a safe takeoff.

The law firm that represented our school district when I was superintendent required all of its attorneys to meet on a weekly basis to review the issues and strategies of various cases assigned to individual members. Each attorney presented the facts of the case and his or her thoughts on how to proceed. The others offered advice, suggested relevant precedents, and shared their experience and insights. Attending the meetings was not optional. One might say this law firm *coerced* its members to attend. The firm, however, believed that all of its clients should have the benefit of the collective expertise of the entire firm, not merely the single attorney to whom the case had been assigned.

When our school district underwent a major construction project, the professionals engaged in the project always worked as a team. Each week, architects, engineers, and the construction manager convened in a collaborative meeting to make certain they were pursuing a common objective according to their established plan. They monitored progress toward clearly defined benchmarks and observed agreed-on protocols for identifying and solving problems. The meetings were not optional, and it might be said that members were *compelled* to be there.

When I went for a comprehensive physical examination, a doctor who reviewed one of the tests initially recommended that I undergo an immediate angioplasty. The hospital protocol, however, *demand*ed that his recommendation be reviewed by two specialists. Those specialists examined the data from the


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test, but they also sought additional information. Based on that information, the team concluded that the procedure was not necessary as long as I engaged in alternative treatments.

In each of these instances, the professional is expected to collaborate with others. In fact, collaborating effectively with others is a condition for membership in their profession. Certainly, they will spend a great deal of their time working individually and autonomously. The pilot will work in isolation during some portions of a flight. A lawyer in the courtroom must be able to respond to the immediate situation. The engineers, architects, and construction managers return to their individual realms to work at their respective tasks in the joint effort to complete their project. And the cardiologist will make decisions based on his or her individual judgment

opt out, because the entire structure of the school will be designed to ensure that they collaborate with their colleagues.

THE WEIGHT OF THE EVIDENCE

Professionals make decisions based on the evidence of the most promising strategy for meeting the needs of those they serve. In a profession, evidence trumps appeals to mindless precedent (“This is how I have always done it”) or personal preference (“This is how I like to do it”). So, let’s apply the standard of the “weight of the evidence” to the question, “Do schools best serve their students when educators work collaboratively or when each educator can elect to work in isolation?”

Professional organizations. Almost all of the professional organizations in education, including the Na-



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when in the operating room. In every case, however, these professionals are required to work with others on a regular basis, and a structure is created to ensure that they do so.

When schools are organized to support the collaborative culture of a professional learning community, classroom teachers continue to have tremendous latitude. Throughout most of their workday and work week they labor in their individual classrooms as they attempt to meet the needs of each student. But the school will also embed processes into the routine practice of its professionals to ensure that they co-labor in a coordinated and systematic effort to support the students they serve. Like the professionals described above, they work interdependently in the pursuit of common purposes and goals. They share their expertise with one another and make that expertise available to all of the students served by the team. They establish clear benchmarks and agreed-on measures to monitor progress. They gather and jointly examine information regarding student learning to make more informed decisions and to enhance their practice. They will not have the opportunity to

tional Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, have specifically endorsed the premise that educators should work collaboratively. In addition, advocacy organizations, such as the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF), also call on educators to work as members of a professional learning community. NCTAF’s president wrote:

Quality teaching is not an individual accomplishment, it is the result of a collaborative culture that empowers teachers to team up to improve student learning beyond what any of them can achieve alone. . . . The idea that a single teacher, working alone, can know and do everything to meet the diverse learning needs of 30 students every day throughout the school year has rarely worked, and it certainly won’t meet the needs of learners in years to come. (Carroll 2009: 13)

Principals have been advised by their professional organizations that one of their key responsibilities and a core strategy for improving student achievement is building the capacity of staff to work as members of a collaborative professional learning commu-

nity. When advocating collaboration, neither principal nor teacher professional associations have added the caveat, “but only if each person wants to.”

Research. There is abundant research linking higher levels of student achievement to educators who work in the collaborative culture of a professional learning community. A recent study of schools and districts that doubled student achievement concluded, “it should be no surprise that one result of



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the multiplicity of activities was a collaborative, professional school culture. . . what is commonly called a ‘professional learning community’ today” (Odden and Archibald 2009: 78). A study of the best school systems in the world found that schools in those systems focused on providing the “high-quality, collaborative, job-focused professional development” characteristic of “professional learning communities” in which teachers work together to help each other improve classroom practice (Barber and Mourshed 2009: 30). The most comprehensive study of factors affecting schooling ever conducted concluded that the most powerful strategy for helping students learn at higher levels was ensuring that teachers work collaboratively in teams to establish the essential learnings all students must acquire, to gather evidence of student learning through an ongoing assessment process, and to use the evidence of student learning to discuss, evaluate, plan, and improve their instruction (Hattie 2009).

A useful exercise for a school or district that claims its purpose and priority is to help students learn at high levels is to gather all the evidence faculty can find that supports the idea that students learn better if educators work in isolation. At the same time, gather all the evidence that students learn at higher levels when educators work as members of collaborative teams. The web site www.allthingsplc.info provides specific quotes from organizations and researchers who have concluded that a collaborative school culture raises student achievement. I’m un-

able to include research indicating students learn at higher levels when educators work in isolation, because I’m unaware of any.

If the group determines that the preponderance of evidence indicates the school will be more successful if its members work together rather than in isolation, then structures should be created to support collaboration, and all members of the staff should be required to participate. An individual’s desire to work in isolation does not trump a professional’s obligation to apply what is considered the most effective practice in his or her field.

The fact that schools create the infrastructure to ensure educators work as members of collaborative teams does not preclude those educators from forming additional, voluntary collaborative communities. Many educators use technology to form virtual communities based on common interests. However, these voluntary communities

should not substitute for school structures and cultures in which working together interdependently is the norm.

ONLY ON WHAT WE WANT

A corollary to the volunteerism argument is that if educators work in collaborative teams, each team must have the autonomy to determine the focus of its work. The issue is presented as a question of power — who will have the authority to decide what we will collaborate about. In a mature profession united in a joint effort to best meet the needs of those it serves, the more relevant questions are: Can we agree that the purpose of our collaboration is to improve our professional practice and the learning of our students? Do we recognize that we must resolve certain critical questions if we are to accomplish that purpose? Can we demonstrate the discipline to focus on the right work?

FOCUSING ON THE RIGHT WORK

Collaboration is a means to an end. Collaboration alone will not improve a school, and in a toxic school culture, providing educators with time to collaborate is likely to reinforce the negative aspects of the culture and deteriorate into complaint sessions. Team meetings that focus on the deficiencies of students, better strategies for punishing students who wear hats, or determining who will pick up the field trip forms will not improve student achievement; however, in many schools topics like these dominate

the discussion. Providing educators with structures and time to support collaboration will not improve schools unless that time is focused on the right work.

What is the right work? As members of collaborative teams, educators in a PLC work collectively to develop a guaranteed and viable curriculum to ensure that students have access to the same essential knowledge and skills regardless of the teacher to whom they are assigned. The team gathers ongoing information regarding the learning of their students through a comprehensive, balanced assessment process that includes common formative assessments developed by the team. The team then jointly analyzes the evidence of student learning from the assessments and uses the information to improve the professional practice of individual members and collective effectiveness of the team. As members look at actual evidence of student proficiency in the knowledge and skills the team has deemed essential, on an assessment the team has agreed is valid, they are able to learn from one another and continually enhance their ability to meet the needs of their students.

Finally, in a professional learning community, the school creates a *systematic* process that ensures that students who are struggling receive additional time and support for learning. Rather than continuing with the education lottery, where what happens when a student experiences difficulty will depend almost solely on the individual teacher to whom that student is assigned, the school will create a multi-tiered, coordinated, and collective response to support that student.

Schools committed to higher levels of learning for both students and adults will not be content with the fact that a structure is in place to ensure that educators meet on a regular basis. They will recognize that the question, "What will we collaborate about," is so vital that it cannot be left to the discretion of each team. Educators in these schools will collectively identify the right work and then create processes to support teams as they focus their efforts on those matters that improve student learning.

POWERFUL CONCEPTS CAN BE APPLIED BADLY

The concept of a collaborative culture of a professional learning community is powerful, but like all powerful concepts, it can be applied badly. Schools can create artificial, rather than meaningful and relevant, teams. Educators can make excuses for low student achievement rather than develop strategies to improve student learning. Teams can concentrate on matters unrelated to student learning. Getting along can be a greater priority than getting results. Administrators can micro-manage the process in ways that do not build collective capacity, or they can attempt to hold teams accountable for collaborating

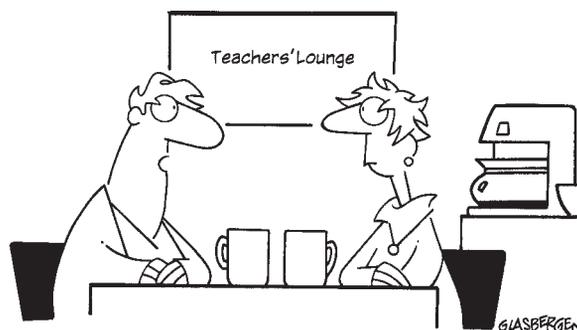
while failing to provide the time, support, parameters, resources, and clarity that are crucial to the success of teams.

Creating a PLC is fraught with difficulty, but that doesn't mean educators should reject the concept or allow individuals to opt out. If they are to be members of a *profession*, educators must work together in good faith to develop their collective capacity to implement this powerful concept effectively.

More than a quarter century has passed since Goodlad warned that overcoming the tradition of teacher isolation will require more than an invitation. We must do more than exhort people to work together. In order to establish schools in which interdependence and collaboration are the new norm, we must create the structures and cultures that *embed* collaboration in the routine practice of our schools, ensure that the collaborative efforts focus on the right work, and support educators as they build their capacity to work together rather than alone. **K**

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"Daydreaming is a serious problem in my classroom. I can't stop thinking about retirement, summer vacation, winter break, snow days . . ."

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