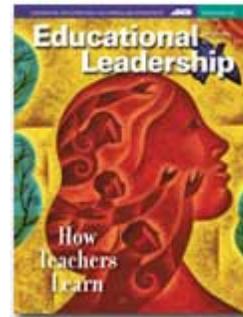Supporting Teacher Learning Teams

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The learning-team model helps teachers make changes in practice that lead to improved student achievement.

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Effective professional development is supposed to foster lasting change in the classroom. When it doesn't, we waste valuable time, resources, and most important, our teachers' trust that time engaged in professional development is well spent. We can avoid this by offering proven content in a delivery model that aligns with characteristics of effective adult learning in school. Professional development also works best when it's on-site, job embedded, sustained over time, centered on active learning, and focused on student outcomes (Chappuis, 2007).

We've tried the traditional workshop approach—which typically doesn't incorporate all of these characteristics—to help teachers develop assessment competence. But we've had uneven success, for a variety of reasons. The amount of content to be learned often exceeds what a workshop can cover, even in a series of sessions. A passive "sit 'n' git" mind-set can permeate the environment, even with an engaging presenter and interactive agenda. In addition, there is no opportunity for the presenter to facilitate the reflection, the putting into practice, the collegial discussions, and the learning that can only take place when participants return to their classrooms.

Attending a workshop or conference can help raise awareness of and enthusiasm for a topic, create a shared vocabulary or foundation of knowledge, or act as a catalyst for further learning. However, when the session is over, continuing support for implementation is seldom available. This is a major drawback of the traditional workshop approach.

A More Purposeful Approach

The learning-team model of professional development has gained popularity as schools seek to match the intent of providing deeper, ongoing, teacher-directed learning with the most suitable mode of professional development. Many school districts have altered their calendars and weekly schedules to provide teachers with regular common planning and learning time. Others have incorporated release times for teacher teams during the instructional day. These structural changes provide a foundation for successful adult learning and help remove the barrier of teacher isolation that is, in part, responsible for the lack of effective professional growth (see Fullan as quoted in Sparks, 2003).

However, the learning-team model we recommend involves more than just attending regular meetings in small groups; it also requires that teachers commit to working and learning *between*

team meetings. Change requires individuals to practice with new information and engage in collaborative sharing, a process that presents its own set of challenges.

Ensuring Success

As with other professional development models, adopting and using the learning-team model does not come with an automatic guarantee of success. For every team that succeeds in changing teacher practice, one or more may stall or even fail. To raise the probability that the learning will "take," consider the following recommendations before you implement the learning-team model.

1. Create a cultural shift in the school.

Fullan (in Sparks, 2003) points to cultural barriers, in addition to existing structural barriers, that schools need to overcome to support good professional development. School leaders might begin by stressing the importance of "teachers as learners," helping teachers understand that improving practice by acquiring new knowledge and skills is a professional obligation and that the work of becoming a great teacher is a career-long endeavor. Incentives, such as a stipend, release time, credit applied toward advancement on the local salary schedule, or college credit, then fall into place as a secondary, rather than a primary, motivator or support.

It's essential to emphasize the long-term, ongoing nature of professional development as opposed to a short-term commercially promised quick fix. Participants need to commit up front to an initiative that may require more of their time and effort than attending afterschool workshops.

Finally, schools should create (and adhere to) group norms for the learning-team experience, such as "Keep the focus on helping students learn," "Involve everyone and make sure all voices are heard," "Stick to the topic or task during meetings," and "Come prepared to meetings."

2. Create an understanding of the process.

Confusion can arise when teachers are accustomed to a model of professional development in which the presenter has all the responsibility for action and the participants' responsibility is limited to just showing up. Set the stage for a change in the delivery mechanism by helping participants understand that the goal of learning teams is to collaboratively strengthen classroom practices that will strengthen student learning.

Learning in learning teams takes place in four related contexts. It begins with an influx of new ideas—through hearing a presentation by an expert, reading books or articles, or viewing an instructional video or footage of classroom practice. Next, it involves shaping the new ideas into classroom practice. Teachers transfer this information to their own contexts by doing such things as preparing lessons, materials, and activities to use with students. Participants then observe and reflect on the results, asking themselves such questions as, What worked? What is the evidence? What needs fine-tuning? and What do I need to learn more about? Finally, participants meet with others to discuss, problem solve, and create. Teachers share what they learned, what they tried, what they observed, what happened with students, and what they still need to work on.

For example, in their study of classroom assessment, participants may read about how to teach students to give one another descriptive feedback. They could try this strategy in their classrooms and then come together to share the specific adaptations they made and the effects they noticed on student learning. They may then discuss how to fine-tune the process for further use.

3. Address the skills needed for self-directed learning.

Some teachers may need to develop specific skills to fully realize the benefits of collaborative, self-directed professional development. Skills that help maximize this model of adult learning include participants' ability to carry out a long-term learning plan systematically and sequentially, compare their current skills and learning needs with the intended learning, gather evidence of their own learning and progress, and connect their learning to new classroom practices (Knowles, 1990).

To develop skills of self-monitoring, for example, the person in charge of the learning team's course of study might identify a list of artifacts that will provide evidence of participants' learning and its effect on student achievement; prepare a protocol for gathering "before," "during," and "after" evidence; and schedule a sharing session for the last team meeting.

4. Get the right facilitators.

Just as the classroom teacher influences student learning more than any other variable does, the skill of the facilitator is central to the success of the learning team. Although it's not always necessary that learning team facilitators be content experts, they should have several skills and dispositions.

For example, they should be able to facilitate discussions, creating a team environment in which all members feel safe and supported even when they disagree by establishing norms that call for this, modeling appropriate responses, and respectfully enforcing adherence to the norms. They should know how to keep the learning focused on transferring new knowledge into classroom practice by bringing the discussion back to this focus with follow-up questions, such as, What have you tried? and How is it working? They should be able to help team members track their growth and its effect on student achievement by organizing a protocol for selecting and reviewing appropriate artifacts.

Skilled facilitators take on the role of "advanced learner," selecting activities matched to the team's needs and doing the reading and activities in advance of meetings so they can help steer team members through unfamiliar or complex concepts. At the same time, they manage the logistical details behind the learning experience, such as preparing agendas, time lines, meeting logs, and handouts.

5. Provide facilitators with adequate support.

Facilitators need to maintain their knowledge base, level of enthusiasm, and facilitation skills to be effective in their roles. School leaders can provide support by creating a network for

facilitators, such as a series of regular meetings during which facilitators function as a learning team themselves, sharing what their teams are doing, planning together for their teams' activities, and exploring topics in which they want greater expertise.

School leaders should provide content minilessons as needed to deepen facilitators' understanding of the concepts that learning teams are working on. They should recognize the contributions that facilitators have made to developing teacher expertise through venues of professional recognition available in their district. Principals need to be periodically updated on what facilitators are doing and where they are in the program so each principal can stay current with the progress of staff members and provide support accordingly.

6. Ensure the active support of school leaders.

Principals don't just set the tone and climate of the building—they also influence the overall culture in which everything else operates. They need to hold the time allocated to professional development sacred, protecting it from interference or distraction. To promote a sense of accomplishment, they should help teachers track and evaluate their own growth by inquiring about changes they have implemented in their teaching practices and changes they have noted in their students' motivation and achievement. And they should model for their faculties the process of being a continual learner, by participating either as a member of a building's learning team or as a member of a district leadership learning team.

A professional development program will have a greater probability of success when the learning goals are clear to all at the building and district levels. Facilitators and principals need to be in agreement on learning expectations for the team, and building and district leaders should be able to articulate what teachers will be learning and why they're learning it. In addition, district or building leaders should communicate to all staff members the expected benefits and proven results of the professional development focus of study. With a supportive framework, a coherent curriculum, and a skillful facilitator, teachers can learn without an expert being physically present in the room with them.

Avoiding the Pitfalls

In after-school workshops, things can go wrong. There can be insufficient handouts, faulty technology, bad lighting, a poor sound system, or a presenter with laryngitis.

Unforeseen problems can also derail learning teams. To reduce the likelihood of problems, start by choosing content that rests on a foundation of research that supports its effect on learning and that translates the research into everyday classroom practice. Look for curriculum materials that are teacher-friendly and suitable for use in a learning-team model of professional development.

Make an inventory of all programs or practices that teachers are being asked to learn, along with the learning goals of each. Is there sufficient time and are there sufficient resources to accomplish everything on the teacher learning plate in one year? This is one of the main reasons for the overuse of the workshop model: It can cover lots of material. But covering does not equal learning, either in the classroom or beyond it. Does your program of professional development

include time to learn, time to practice, time to discuss, and time to reflect for the learning goals it addresses? If not, it's best to pare the year's adult learning expectations down to what you can do well—or plan for a multiyear implementation.

Carefully consider the composition of the learning team itself, the number of members it should have, and whether they should be from the same department or grade level. Provide a thorough orientation for participants at the outset, including the rationale and context. Explain why you're studying this topic, what's to be gained when it's transferred to the classroom, how long the program will last, and how it's connected to other school and district initiatives.

Schedule meetings in advance and at times that enable all team members to attend. Dedicate that time to learning and to nothing else. In a recent study of a professional development project in which we were involved, the investigator found that "a lack of sufficient meeting time was the single most common constraint cited by teachers in identifying impediments to the successful function of their teams" (Weinbaum, 2008, p. 26).

When at all possible, work with volunteer participants. Our experience has shown that teams are most effective when participants choose to be part of the team as opposed to being required to be there. This may seem at odds with creating a schoolwide culture of learning or a focus on a particular topic, but the two are not mutually exclusive. School leaders can create buy-in through offering initial presentations or short workshops that introduce the content and the research—an overview of what works, why it works, and how it works—along with an example or two that can be useful in the classroom right away.

Stay with the same professional development focus for multiple years, inviting participation each year. Plan for the implementation to become "viral," building to a critical mass.

Finally, clearly communicate the structure and responsibilities of learning-team participation. What separates the learning-team model from many of its professional development cousins is that learning does not just take place during the team meetings. In schools where teacher teams already meet regularly to review data or discuss or decide on schoolwide issues, this will help minimize confusion between those types of team meetings, which tackle a specific issue, and the learning-team professional development meetings, which are better suited to the deeper learning that substantive change requires.

The Best Kind of Learning

Collaborative learning teams provide more than one-time exposure to new ideas. Over time, they can change day-to-day teaching by giving teachers the ongoing opportunity to learn together, apply learning to the classroom, and reflect on what works and why. Just as learning improves for students when they have the structured opportunity to reflect on what they know and don't know in relation to the targets of instruction, adult learning also benefits from intentional reflection on classroom practice. Collaborative learning teams can transform the nature of adult interaction and learning in schools by engaging teachers in the same process of continual learning and improvement that we ask our students to strive for in their work.

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