

Teachers Learning Together

Creating Learning Communities

Adapted from
Coming Together As Readers

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E D U C A T I O N

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Teachers Learning Together

Creating Learning Communities

As schools focus on improving student engagement and achievement, bringing together teachers and all others involved in instruction is important. Recent studies of schools that produce student learning well above that expected by their demographics identify teachers who engage together as learners as a key ingredient in their success (CIERA 2001; WestEd 2000; CELA 2000). An analysis of the eight schools that won the Model Professional Development Award from the US Office of Education found that these schools with teachers learning and working together had twice the student achievement gains of comparable schools, despite the level of poverty or transience. The report concluded that “At the heart of each school’s success is an exemplary professional development program. . . . Teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators have coalesced as learning communities and focused their own learning on what will translate into learning for students. Everyone is learning, and everyone benefits” (WestEd 2000, 1).

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Creating schools that hum with active learning and are real professional learning communities is challenging. However, there are many resources and professional groups available to support these efforts and increasing numbers of examples of schools that have reaped the rewards of their commitment. All involve some form of collaboration—either within a single school, as part of a larger network of teachers beyond the building level, or as a school-university partnership.

SHARED STAFF STUDY

One of the most natural ways for teachers to come together is to create a learning support team for themselves. A small group learning support team can expand so that shared instructional study becomes a part of the life of the school with staff time devoted to it. Committing to shared staff study is becoming more common. A culture where all teachers are valued and where questions and problems can be openly discussed is by necessity the cornerstone of successful shared learning. Establishing this level of openness and trust may take some time. Different approaches exist to address situations in which such a community has not been established or where it has become dormant.

In resistant settings, it may be easiest for two or three teachers who are interested in continuing their learning to simply make a commitment to one another to establish a regular meeting time together. The teachers select a topic that is of concern to all, and then each can select some articles to read and discuss together. An alternative format is for each teacher to bring in some samples of student work that are of concern and share these with the others in the group on a rotating basis. Getting the ideas and perspectives of other teachers on how to make the instructional activities more effective can be stimulating and,

Getting the Most from Learning Communities

- Use clear, agreed-upon student achievement goals to focus and shape teacher learning.
- Provide an expanded array of professional development opportunities.
- Embed ongoing, informal learning into the school culture.
- Build a highly collaborative school environment where working together to solve problems and to learn from one another become cultural norms.
- Find and use the time to allow teacher learning to happen.
- Keep checking a broad range of student performance data.

(WestEd 2000, 12)

when done sensitively, can have lasting effects. With testing being such a dominant part of school life, finding issues and questions to study with a group is not difficult.

Some teachers have consciously taken time to belong to book clubs or literature circles to nurture their own reading and experience the same kinds of shared literacy that is the practice in their classrooms (Daniels 2002). Talking in turn and staying on topic helps teachers understand the reality of literature discussion in their classrooms and helps them identify with students. Talking with students about particular experiences and insights gained in discussing a book with other adults helps make readily apparent one of the joys readers can have throughout life. Even when they are proficient readers, students are often surprised that adults respond differently to texts. Students can get very interested in their teachers' involvement in literacy and ask for stories from subsequent book club discussions.

The popularity of adult book clubs keeps expanding. Daniels reports that “we now work to develop simultaneous book clubs of teachers, parents, and kids—sometimes having all these groups read the same book and come together for a festival of sharing” (2002, 6).