

Collaborative Systems of Support

Learning for All

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Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	4
DEDICATIONS	4
INTRODUCTION	5
CHAPTER 1 A Rationale for Collaborative Systems of Support	9
CHAPTER 2 The Schools we Deserve ... and Can Design.....	17
CHAPTER 3 Leadership – Coordination and Communication.....	41
CHAPTER 4 Core Support – Differentiated Teaching and Learning for All.....	57
CHAPTER 5 More Support – Individualised, Timely and Targeted	79
CHAPTER 6 Specialised Support – Highly Personalised and Proximal.....	87
CHAPTER 7 So What? Now What? – Summarising Key Information and Identifying Next Steps.....	113
EPILOGUE	127
REFERENCES	135
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	143

Introduction

High levels of learning for all students.

The above sentence is so seductively simple, but in reality for most of us it has been the elusive and unobtainable goal that has been beyond our grasp despite our exhaustive efforts to achieve it.

Seven simple little words that connect many of us to the reason we went into education in the first place. Seven simple little words, behind which sit a mountain of frustrations, entrenched beliefs and preconceived opinions. Seven simple little words, which if achieved would transform the lives of the students we serve. Seven simple little words that can either inspire us to keep trying our hardest or cause us to give up and live with the status quo.

Imagine if we were able to achieve our goal of achieving high levels of learning for all students. It has long been the lofty goal of school improvement endeavours, but all too often has evaded us, even though we have held it as the “holy grail” of our endeavours as educators and as school leaders.

The challenges faced when implementing school improvement efforts are complex. Sitting at the epicentre of these efforts is ensuring that all students learn at high levels without exception. In this book, *Collaborative Systems of Support*, the authors provide schools, leaders and educators with the opportunity to address these challenges both practically and ethically, with clarity and certainty.

Inspired by their experience in transforming their schools through Professional Learning Communities, Response to Intervention and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, the authors draw on their collective and extensive background in the field to propose a collaborative and systematic process.

Collaborative Systems of Support revolutionises the way we think about teaching and learning to finally make high levels of learning for all students a reality. It outlines how – when we effectively and comprehensively provide the Core Support, More Support and Specialised Support needed for differentiated, individualised and personalised learning – it is possible to meet the learning needs of every single student.

Readers will learn:

- a compelling rationale for why we need to transform schools to achieve higher levels of learning
- how to transform schools so they can provide Core Support, More Support and Specialised Support to all students to ensure high levels of learning without exception
- how to move from theory to action when taking genuine collective responsibility for student learning

Collaborative Systems of Support – A Visual Model



As depicted in the visual model above, we see the work of a school as similar to that of the inner workings of a watch. In order for the hands to turn the leadership team needs to function as the battery, providing the energy and direction for all the cogs to work together. If the “hands” for the school are high levels of learning for all students, then the other cogs depicted (Core Support, More Support and Specialised Support) must focus on their job while working with each other to ensure this lofty goal can actually be achieved.

solving and the requisite, collective actions on behalf of students. Systems are not rigid. As we have written previously, a system is not a noun, it's a verb. It might be hard, understandably hard, to capture these “verb” variables in a research study, but the processes and practices they represent have been validated by research (Hattie, 2009; 2012).

One of the keys to improving schools is to ensure teachers know the learning intentions and success criteria of their lessons, know how well they are attaining these criteria for all their students, and know where to go next in light of the gap between students' current knowledge and understanding and the success criteria; this can be maximized in a safe and collaborative environment where teacher talk to each other about teaching.

Hattie, 2009, p. 239

As we will attempt to make clear throughout the remainder of this book, structures and systems are critical and, for the record, we are geeks about them. Collaborative systems work when they become the foundation of a school's culture. These systems include:

- teaching and learning to mastery and depth of behavioural and academic priorities for all (often known as Tier 1 and to which we refer as Core Support)
- timely and targeted supports for greater levels of student mastery of academic and behavioural priorities ... so that students don't fall behind (or further behind) and so students can reach greater depths of understanding (often known as Tier 2 and to which we refer as More Support)
- highly individualised supports to meet students at, and nudge them from, their zones of proximal development – intensive supports to ameliorate significant deficits in foundational skills (often known as Tier 3 and to which we refer as Specialised Support)

Collaborative Systems of Support and the related sets of principles and practices that they represent in an organised manner (e.g. Response to Intervention, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, Professional Learning Communities, Universal Design for Learning, Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports) work and are among the most research-based practices ever studied in the history of education (Hattie, 2009, 2012).

Chapter 3

Leadership – Coordination and Communication



The visible leadership of school principals and other school leaders is essential to ensuring success for students and staff, and greater outcomes for schools. For any effective work to take hold in a school, it must be fully supported by the school leadership team and must become part of what a school believes, and it must be communicated to all stakeholders that the work will lead to better outcomes for all students.

We possess the knowledge of what strategies and frameworks will result in success. We know that curricular and instructional dogmas work well for some but that balanced approaches are more sensible and successful. We know that isolated supports will result in little change, but the same supports operating as part of an integrated, collaborative approach have the potential to raise the level of student achievement. We know that cultures are more important than structures, and that cultures are created and co-created by leaders. As Schlechty (1997, p. 136) states, “Structural change that is not supported by cultural change will eventually be overwhelmed by the culture, for it is in the culture that the organisation finds meaning and stability.”

These questions do not concern the “content” aspect of our work – they concern the “intent” part of our work. Effective, involved, supportive leadership is the key to closing that gap. “Every action that a prominent school leader takes demonstrates his or her priorities and belief system” (Reason, 2010, p. 13).

As mentioned earlier, the sixth question Marzano et. al (2016) have added to the literature on building collaborative cultures addresses the critical issue of how leadership teams should create the conditions needed for collaborative systems of support to flourish. In this chapter we outline the coordination and communication imperative to the success of this work.

Let’s examine the teams, coordination and communication required to integrate the essential elements of some of the most researched initiatives in education today – Professional Learning Communities, Response to Intervention and Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports – as we build Collaborative Systems of Support for all students.

accountable for the consistent implementation of all processes, including regular team meetings, to check on the progress of students.

Core – A Critical Element of RTI and the Focus of Teacher Teams

As long as schools continue with the traditional emphasis on breadth over depth, coverage over mastery and teaching over learning, we will continue to have students requiring intervention, students receiving failing marks and being kept back a year, and students being identified with a disability who are, in fact, simply being denied a guaranteed and viable curriculum. We can and must think differently and do better. The foundation of any school must be a belief in all students, a belief that working together is the only way to get it done and a belief that in highly effective schools teaching and learning are inextricably linked. It all starts with carefully and completely defining this guaranteed and viable curriculum (the “need to know” essentials for all students) and this begins with our core instruction accessible by all students. Why must we define this key content? Here are some thoughts from key researchers in our domain.

- Learning, and the curriculum we determine is most essential for students to learn, will only be guaranteed and viable if teams of educators define it clearly (Marzano, 2001).
- There are too many standards, even in light of any new or proposed initiatives (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Schmoker, 2011).
- Standards must be unpacked so that educators and students know what mastery looks like, so instruction can match these expectations, and so teams of educators can backwards plan (McTighe & Wiggins, 2005).

The deeper our understanding of content and the more collaboratively we unpack and unwrap standards, the better our assessment of student learning. This should lead to more accurate identifications of the needs of students and more specificity in diagnosing these areas of need, all leading to more targeted interventions to close the gaps.

It is inconceivable that we can cover all of the content on hand in any curriculum guide or standards document. We cannot intervene and provide more time and differentiated support on all standards with students at risk. We must identify essential learning (prioritised standards) and use this to help determine the focus of interventions. How do we systematically, carefully and completely define key core content? We must harness the power of the team through deep collaboration. By collaboratively prioritising the standards or learning targets most critical for all students to master; unpacking that content so all teachers and students understand the level of rigour and format associated with mastery, as well as the types of learning that logically precede and follow mastery of the essentials; and unwrapping standards to ensure that we are assessing student mastery as accurately and authentically as possible, we will effectively define what all students must become proficient in to ensure successful transitions – unit by unit, year level by year level, and ultimately in the next phase of their lives after school.

Chapter 5

More Support – Individualised, Timely and Targeted



Core Support calls for high-quality, differentiated instruction that is designed to meet the needs of all students. Teachers achieve this goal by collaboratively examining evidence of student response to academic and behavioural instruction and identifying which instructional strategies met student needs. When a student does not respond to this focused, differentiated core instruction, educators must supplement core instruction with More Support, whether the needs are academic or behavioural, or both. Whether this means additional time, the use of alternative strategies, smaller adult-to-student ratios or more targeted supports, the response must be derived from the collaborative planning and the evidence collected and analysis by all staff members. Decisions to intervene with More Support are based on evidence of a student’s response to focused core instruction.

When all educators within Collaborative Systems of Support incorporate the practices of basing instructional decisions on evidence of learning, the learning gains for students dramatically increase. Collaborative teacher teams may follow a five-step data protocol to examine student work, apply effective instructional strategies and monitor student response to the supports provided.

1. Collect and chart/display the data
2. Analyse data and prioritise needs
3. Establish SMART goals: set, review and revise
4. Select instructional strategies
5. Identify strategies to monitor impact

Teams require strong leadership to provide guidance, direction, vision, support and feedback throughout the collaborative inquiry cycle. The collaborative practices of Professional Learning Communities and those of data teams align perfectly within Collaborative Systems of Support provided in the Core Support, More Support and Specialised Support phases. In fact, these practices are an essential element of the work of all educators within Collaborative Systems of Support. More Support must be provided in addition to high-quality core instruction. Additional, supplemental interventions serve to augment core instruction, not supplant it. When used within a system, and when teams frequently determine the extent to which students are responding to

Prescribe

As we relentlessly strive to find the right support for students in need – supports that will lead to positive responses to the supports provided – we are guided by several factors:

- We are seeking *causes* of student difficulties. We must look beneath the *symptoms* and determine the *why*. For example, when striving to determine to appropriate behavioural support when a student is misbehaving, we look beneath the symptom (perhaps inattentiveness) to identify the function, purpose or cause of the symptom: Why is the student misbehaving? We then do our very best to match a support to the cause.
- The more precise and focused we can be in making this match, the more immediate the positive response. Research has continually validated this targeted approach (Gersten, Compton, Connor, Dimino, Santoro & Linan-Thompson, 2009).
- As we will note below, in addition to the learning benefits (students respond more quickly to supports), there are logistical benefits. When focusing on targeted causes, we can effect a significant change in 30 minutes per day. If we instead provide broad, unfocused supports that do not address the underlying causes of difficulties, much more time per day will likely be required. Again, this is validated by the research (Burns & Gibbons, 2008; Burns, VanDerHeyden & Boice, 2008). We (schools, educators and students) simply do not have time to spare within the school day and the school year. Students surely do not have time within their learning journeys; gaps must be addressed, ameliorated and/or sustainable work-around plans must be identified and practised immediately.

If we find that students are not responding to the supports that we are using, we suggest that we do not simply seek new supports. Instead we may need to better identify the causes of student difficulties and better match a support to the diagnosed antecedent skill. This process may be iterative and we will not always be right the first time. But we never give up. In fact, we expect that we will learn quite a bit about the underlying causes of student difficulties through the very act of prescribing and providing supports.

A few more notes on prescribing targeted supports: Several colleagues have lamented that they cannot provide all of the supports to meet all of the deficits in foundational skills a student may currently be working to overcome. We get it. The constraints on time (not to mention staff) will make providing multiple forms of intensive, highly Specialised Support in a day difficult if not impossible. However, here's a contrarian point of view to consider. We may not need to provide multiple forms of Specialised Support. Instead, let's identify the students' most immediate area of need and intensively focus on that area:

- Students who experience more academic success behave better.
- Students who develop more positive and productive behavioural skills are better prepared to learn academic skills.
- Students who read more accurately and fluently comprehend better.

- some students will need additional time and alternative supports during and at the completion of units of instruction, as revealed by evidence, to master core priorities, while others will be ready for greater levels of complexity and will greatly benefit from opportunities to delve into priorities at greater levels of depth (More Support)
- Some students will be in desperate need of immediate, intensive and targeted support to ameliorate significant deficits in foundational skills – highly specialised support to meet vulnerable students at, and nudge them from, their zones of proximal development (Specialised Support).

Start With Culture, Not Climate

Keeping in mind that climate is how we feel and culture is how we act, we must analyse both within our system. We can look at the surface level of our school and determine whether this is a place to which people enjoy coming and within which people enjoy working (climate). However, cultures of high expectations and support for all students can only make a difference for students when we act. We must boldly and transparently analyse the status of our cultures and confirm if there are unwavering beliefs and actions within the principles and practices related to high levels of learning for all.

Teams within Collaborative Systems of Support understand there is no one else who can or should serve students' academic, pro-social and pro-functional skill needs. Teams must identify the causes, antecedents and explanations in order to determine the necessary level of supports, then adjust and revise based on student responses to the supports. When we state that “all” means “all”, we mean it. If a student will be expected to live a happy and productive adult life without accommodations and modifications (which is the case for 99% of students, including the majority of students who receive Specialised Support), then they are in the all category and are provided support through Collaborative Systems of Support.

Within Collaborative Systems of Support there must be no general education and special education divide in the support that is provided. Collaborative Systems of Support serves students based on their needs, not their label. Moreover, staff support students based on the staff members' availabilities and expertise, not their job title or funding source. Every school is equipped with highly trained professionals who can do remarkable things in supporting students, our schools just need to identify the strengths of each staff member and put them in the best position to help students experience success. These supports are provided to students for both academic and behavioural skills within the system.

You cannot be part of Collaborative Systems of Support if you don't believe high levels of learning for all students is inevitable. For teams to be successful within this framework, they cannot just go through the motions and hope that students will find success. There is compelling experiential and neurological evidence to confirm that all students can learn at high levels and it's our professional obligation to make this a reality. Benjamin Bloom provided us with this information in the 1960s