

CHAPTER ONE

Why Educators Should Work Together

The Case for Faculty Teamwork

MANY TEACHERS KNOW WHY

When I was in grade school, I couldn't figure out why all the teachers seemed to know, within a day or two, that I had misbehaved in class or written an excellent story for my third-grade teacher. The teachers seemed to know everything about every student, and they regularly told our parents all that they knew. They didn't wait for parent-teacher nights. My teachers called my parents a lot more than I would have liked. Sometimes they gave my parents good news and sometimes bad news, which I heard about later.

High school wasn't much better. Again, the teachers knew what was going on with students. Teachers that I had never had in class would congratulate me for achievements or reprimand me for rule violations they had not witnessed. How they knew so much was puzzling to me. Eventually, the answer to this puzzle came to me. I went to parochial schools. All my teachers were nuns. My teachers talked about their students in the parlor after dinner or when they were out shopping. The mystery was solved.

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Of course, I don't think that all teachers should be nuns or live communally. However, this story does provide an example of what many teachers know to be true. When teachers share information with each other and with parents and work together in the best interests of students, good things happen.

Research tells us that when teachers work together, students tend to learn more and behave better (see section 1 of the Bibliography). Student test scores increase as well. In such schools, continuous improvement efforts that benefit students are the norm—not the exception. Parental involvement is higher in schools where teachers collaborate. Incidents of violence among students are less frequent. Also, teachers in collaborative schools feel more confident that they can influence student learning. They believe in their teaching abilities. These findings are extraordinarily good news. In a sea of costly educational reform initiatives, here is something free that teachers and administrators can do that will help students learn and will create a better working environment for educators as well.

I have met lots of educators who know that teamwork among teachers has positive effects on student learning and behavior. I also have met teachers who know that teamwork has positive effects on teachers as well. If many of us know these things, why isn't faculty teamwork the norm? Why is it that in many schools, teachers still work alone in their classrooms and have very few work-related conversations with their peers? Why is it that many of the school-based teams that do exist are mired in conflict and unable to work effectively? Two answers to these questions are provided next.

MANY TEACHERS REMAIN UNCONVINCED

Teaching has been called “the second most private activity.” Leading faculty meetings has been compared to “herding cats.” From kindergarten through graduate school, collaboration among faculty members and administrators still is not the norm. In addition, many teachers and administrators don't see the need for faculty teamwork and collaboration. They question how working with other faculty will improve individual teacher performance

in the classroom. How, they wonder, will working collaboratively with other teachers influence a teacher standing alone in front of a group of students?

One answer to that question is that well-functioning work groups have more influence over member behaviors and attitudes. Members of high-functioning faculty groups agree with group goals and norms because they participated in their creation. Faculty members who collaborate with others are more committed to making the improvements in curriculum and teaching methods necessary to improve student outcomes. In addition, collaboration yields a more coordinated and integrated curriculum, helps manage students with behavioral problems, and provides teachers the opportunity to participate in schoolwide decision making.

Despite some educators' concerns about the relevance of faculty teamwork, teams have infiltrated the U.S. educational system. In the search for strategies to improve student achievement, teamwork has become commonplace in the nation's schools. Currently, faculty groups as a whole, grade-level teams, vertical teams, school leadership teams, department teams, and site-based management teams are just some of the kinds of teams operating in the majority of U.S. schools.

Some teachers believe that, like many innovations in education, the emphasis on teams will be short-lived. Other "innovations" will take the place of teamwork as the innovation "du jour." Although other innovations undoubtedly will come along, teams will not go away. They are, and they should be, here to stay.

There is just too much research evidence that in schools in which faculty members work together effectively, students learn more (see section 1 of the Bibliography). I have been involved in two of the research studies on this topic. In both of those studies, the results were the same: Students learn more (and perform better on standardized tests) in schools where faculty, administrators, and staff work well together. There was an added benefit as well. More parents are actively involved in schools where faculty and staff groups are collaborative and productive. In the face of this evidence, we can't "just close our doors and teach."

We need to work to create high-performing faculty groups and teams at all educational levels.

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BUT WE DON'T KNOW HOW

A major block to creating effective faculty groups and teams is that many teachers don't know how to work with others. A cursory glance at undergraduate teacher education programs offers one reason why this is so. The preparation of teachers focuses on the technical aspects of teaching. Little or no emphasis is placed on developing team membership or leadership skills.

A few years ago, I made an impassioned plea to a college of education curriculum revision committee to include teamwork and collaboration skills in the new curriculum. They all agreed that these skills were important, but some felt there was no room in the already packed curriculum. Other content areas were simply more important. I pointed out that curriculum development expertise, for example, is of little use if teachers don't know how to work with others to develop a coordinated, integrated curriculum. If faculty planning groups fail to agree on curriculum matters, individual curriculum expertise will be of little value. Some of the committee members nodded in agreement, but others disagreed vehemently with my point. Sadly, the curriculum committee was demonstrating the point that I was making. The committee was divided on this issue and probably other issues as well. Without the skills necessary to work through those disagreements, I felt that the side with more power, or more endurance, would push through their version of the revised curriculum. That turned out to be the case. In the end, students at all levels lose when faculty members lack teamwork skills.

Over the centuries, teachers came to see themselves as independent practitioners. They have designed their own lesson plans and delivered those lessons using a teaching method of their choosing. This sense of autonomy pervaded the profession and continues relatively unabated in colleges and universities. In K-12 schools of the more recent past, there were curriculum guidelines to follow, but within that constraint, there was considerable freedom to choose teaching methods and make decisions about other aspects of instruction. Educators have had a lot of latitude, which has made them prone to negative attitudes about conformity and collaboration. Academic freedom is alive and well in the hearts and minds of educators. To the present day, many of us do not play well with others.

Now, however, every aspect of the educational process is under heavy scrutiny. Who can teach, what should be taught, how content should be taught, how we evaluate student learning, how schools should be run, and by whom are all being investigated. The search for “best practices” is on.

This public scrutiny is the result of two realities. First, the knowledge explosion of the 20th century is picking up even more speed in the 21st century. There is more to learn than ever before. Also, more knowledge and skills are expected of workers, and that will only increase in the coming years.

Years ago, kids with learning problems spent more time helping the school janitor or helping in the cafeteria than they did in class. They sat in the back of the room, caused trouble occasionally, and quit school at age 16. Most of those kids found jobs involving manual labor. Today, those jobs are much fewer in number. Today, educators must do their best to educate all children. For the first time in human history, we are attempting to educate all children to the extent possible. This is a formidable task and will require changes in every aspect of the educational process. The task is made even more daunting by the fact that there is more to learn than ever before.

The second reality that is fueling the educational reform movement is the simple fact that all institutions and organizations become entrenched over time. Standard practices that have become irrelevant are kept in place. People tend to resist changes of any type. The way we’ve always done it may not be the best way to do it, but we tend to keep doing it anyway. It’s a good idea to periodically assess what we’re doing and how we’re doing it to keep from getting stuck in a rut.

The problem with all of this reform is that if educators can’t, or won’t, work with each other, with parents, and with the community, improvement plans do not get implemented. That is evident in the number of school improvement efforts that have failed to take root. For this reason, innumerable educational experts are calling for the development of collegial or collaborative school climates or cultures.

In collaborative schools, teachers have frequent, meaningful discussions with each other and with administrators about teaching content and methods. Teachers observe each other’s classes and give each other helpful feedback. Teachers share ideas, plan

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lessons together, and work to coordinate and integrate the curriculum across disciplines and grade levels. In collaborative schools, teachers and administrators work well together, and leadership is a shared responsibility. In short, continuous improvement is possible.

Sounds great, doesn't it? There's a problem, though. Many teachers, principals, administrators, and specialists have no idea how to go about creating a collaborative school culture. There has been a lot of talk about the importance of a collaborative school culture and climate, but very little concrete advice has been provided about how to create a collaborative culture.

Some educators work in what I can only describe as war zones. For example, the culture of one middle school included differences of opinion about school goals and a lack of trust among teachers and between teachers and the principal. There were very different views about how and what to teach and an unspoken norm not to discuss those differences with each other. It would take a lot of work to change the essence of this culture from one of alienation to one in which collaboration was the norm. How should the staff change things? What might work? Where should they start?

Contrast that scenario with one that I heard about recently. In this case, the elementary school was brand new. The teachers and leadership team of that school were handpicked for their enthusiasm as well as their professional competence. There was no existing culture to overcome. Instead, they could create the culture that they wanted, and that's exactly what they did. During the first year, grade-level teams were put into place. Vertical, or multi-grade, teams were added during the second year. All staff participated in a yearly retreat to review progress and set improvement goals for the next year. The children in this low-income community flourished in their school's environment, and parental and community involvement were plentiful and positive.

Of course, there may have been an element of luck in this case. It's possible things might have been different. Also, even in this positive environment, not all teams were performing at a high level. The fourth-grade team, for example, was less invested in continuous improvement and seemed unwilling to go the extra mile. However, it is a little easier to start from scratch than to try to turn a culture based on alienation and suspicion into one based on trust and teamwork.

Most educators are not fortunate enough to be assigned to a brand-new school. They work in schools that have been in existence for many years. In many of those schools, staff members have been working with each other for a very long time. If the culture of a school is negative, or one that does not encourage innovation, what can be done to change the situation? If it were easy to change a culture, most of us would be eager to change it, because working in a negative or rigid environment is not healthy and is no fun at all. You have to keep your head down to avoid skirmishes or curb your enthusiasm for a new teaching technique to avoid hearing something like the following:

“We tried that before you joined the faculty. It didn’t work then—what makes you think it will work now?” (Sound familiar?)

Is there any way out of this conundrum? What can educators do to create healthy and productive cultures in which students learn, teachers are confident, and parents and community members actively support the learning process?

WHAT WE CAN DO

Calls for the creation of collaborative school cultures abound. But what does that mean, and how do school cultures develop in the first place? People who are involved with a school collectively create the content of the school’s culture through a series of conversations and disagreements in formal and informal groups (see section 2 of the Bibliography). These conversations eventually produce shared assumptions among school staff about what is true, what should be valued, and what the rules and norms for staff behavior should be. These shared assumptions affect staff perceptions, behaviors, and relationships. Once in place, shared assumptions are difficult, but not impossible, to change.

School culture is born in small groups and exported to other school groups until shared assumptions develop within and among these formal and informal groups. So, to change culture, small-group assumptions must change and be exported to other groups within the school. To do this, faculty and staff members need to understand how groups function, how groups get stuck, and how group members can develop change strategies to support positive shifts in group culture and school culture.

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The goal of this book, then, is to translate what social scientists have learned about work groups into straightforward, practical guidelines for educators about how groups work, how groups get stuck, and what educators can do to ensure the development of high-performance faculty groups capable of improving student learning and achievement.

All the information in this book is based on solid research and theory. If you want to read more on a topic, you'll find references in the Bibliography at the back of the book. Examples of, and stories about, faculty teams are found throughout the book. These are based on my own experience and the experiences of educators from across the country who were willing to share their stories.

This book is about real faculty groups whose members are pressed for time, have too many preparations, and may be members of three or four different work teams at the same time. My intention is not to burden you with more things to do. In fact, I know that if you implement the guidelines provided in this book, you will have more time, not less. You won't feel like you're attending the same meeting over and over again. Things will get done more efficiently and in a timely manner.

I also believe that if school-based teams implement these guidelines, team members will feel better in a number of ways. For example, a teacher who recently retired said to me, "I felt wickedly lonely most of the time—lonely in my ideas and lonely when I was trying to solve a problem with a student or a lesson plan. I got little support from other teachers or administrators. I felt beaten down by the negativity of my colleagues." This teacher's feelings are not unusual. Many teachers and school administrators have expressed a sense of isolation and loneliness in their work.

Another teacher described department meetings as being infused with "a strange mistrust. Teachers didn't want to share ideas because they were afraid that other teachers might steal those ideas and take credit for them." This, too, is not an unusual story, but it is a sad one. In school groups and school cultures that create this "strange mistrust," both students and teachers lose. Students lose because best practices are not shared, and professional development and collegial support are not possible. Teachers lose for the same reasons and also because their workplace is not healthy. Loneliness, mistrust, and bickering are draining and depressing. It is inconceivable that a teacher in such a workplace

environment can do her or his best work. Being a great teacher involves quality preparation and quality presentation. This is not possible in a lonely, suspicious, depressing environment.

Contrast this with the experience of one assistant superintendent in his efforts to establish literacy centers in three low-performing elementary schools. He stated, "The team I supervised was second to none. They knew what needed to be done, communicated their needs, shared their frustrations, and stubbornly refused to let the process fail. In spite of numerous setbacks, lack of support from building administrative leadership, and resistance on the part of many staff members, they overcame these obstacles and stayed the course. Students and parents were the ultimate beneficiaries of their work. The community collaborations established over the 2 years the team was officially together continue to this day. What a great group to work with for 2 years."

This is what we all want. We want to be part of something noble and good. We want to make changes for the better. We want to be excited about our work. As teachers, we earnestly want to make a significant difference in the lives of students. I hope that in the following chapters you will find ways to have such experiences on a much more regular basis.