



RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Productive Use of Collaborative Time

Many schools have embraced the idea of professional learning communities (PLC's). While the term is used to describe many types of collaborative activities, PLC's are most successful when they focus intently on improving student learning. In these communities of learners there is a shared commitment to continually learn and act on that learning in ways that positively impact students' educational experience.

PLC's are most successful when teachers have time to work with colleagues on professional tasks. While there are many different ways to provide collaborative time, it is the one essential tool for teachers to develop a collaborative and collegial school culture.

How Much Time

The amount of time varies depending on the task, but the evidence is that less frequent extended blocks of time are more productive than more frequent short periods. Teachers are responsible for a whole set of professional tasks and collaborative time is most productive when teachers also have time to attend to these other tasks.

Build Capacity

Schools that have collaborative time are fortunate. So it is important to assure that the time is used productively. Research suggests that there are two things principals can immediately do to affirm the importance of collaborative time. First, be very clear about the task to be completed during collaborative time. Identify the "product" that is expected from each group and then monitor the use of the time. Second, visit meetings to be part of the collaboration and get a sense of what is working and what is not. Your presence will signal the importance of collaborative time.

The most successful use of collaborative time occurs when there is an intentional commitment to building the capacity of the staff to participate fully in collaborative activities. Five strategies have been identified.

Develop and Use Norms of Collaboration – Professional conversation about complex issues involving student learning require agreement on the "ground-rules" for the discussion. The most successful groups agree on their norms and then monitor their use. The *Adaptive Schools* website (www.adaptiveschools.com) provides tools, resources and a set of suggested norms.

Learn to Provide Constructive Feedback – Similarly, healthy groups are committed to talking about contentious issues and know that it is important to develop the skill to provide constructive and respectful feedback especially when talking about tough issues. Both the *Center for Adaptive Schools* (www.adaptiveschools.com) and the *Coalition of Essential Schools* (www.essentialschools.org) provide resources and tools for working on this issue.

Resolve Group Conflicts – Equally important is the need to address and resolve conflicts among groups or individuals within a group. The most successful PLC's are those where adults reserve the right to disagree but do so in a respectful way. The *Annenberg Institute for School Reform* (www.annenberginstitute.org), the *Coalition of Essential Schools* (www.essentialschools.org) and the *Center for Adaptive Schools* (www.adaptiveschools.com) provide protocols for working on this issue.



Resources

Selected print and online resources about this topic are available on page 3.

Build Trusting Relationships – The foundation to each of these issues is to diligently work at building and sustaining trusting relationships among individuals and groups in your school, between administration and teachers and between grade levels, content areas and departments. Here are three resources that discuss ways to build, and lose trust, in the workplace---40 Ways to Build Trust (<http://www.tgconsultants.com/articles/trustworkforce.html>), 6 Ingredients of Successful Collaboration (<http://socialmediatoday.com/index.php?q=SMC/185570>), and 11 Ways to Build Trust (<http://www.jongordon.com/blog/2011/04/11/11-ways-to-build-trust/>).

Clarify Decision-Making Processes – Even when groups attend to the first four issues the process for making decisions can be contentious. It is very important to be clear about how decisions are made and it is much easier to talk about a decision-making process before you begin the work, than when it is time to make a decision. Consensus is always the goal but occasionally that doesn't work. There are lots of other options from voting to multi-voting (<http://www.sixsigmaspc.com/dictionary/multivoting.html>), use of a consensogram (<http://www.iss.k12.nc.us/cao/consensogram.htm>), or the “Fist to Five” (<http://freechild.org/Firestarter/Fist2Five.htm>).

Characteristics of Productive Groups

The most productive groups attend to the five issues discussed earlier. They also pay attention to the following:

- **Clarity of Purpose** - Just getting together without a clear idea about what is to be accomplished leads to frustration and may lead people to choose not to participate. For example, is the purpose to discuss and identify options and alternatives, or is the purpose to make a decision.
- **An Agenda** – Most participants appreciate an agenda that details what will be discussed. The agenda may be developed collaboratively but plan to do so in advance. You can use a wiki to create an online site for each collaborative group. Wikis are social media tools to share information about a project, gather input, and work collaboratively. Wikispaces (www.wikispaces.com) is one of the most popular sites and is free for educators.
- **Meeting Standards/Norms** – Not only is it important to have norms about how to conduct collaborative activity, it is important to have operational norms. For example, seating arrangements, starting and ending on time, and maintaining a group memory of discussion and decisions are all common operational norms. Such norms provide the structure for group productivity.

Adult Learning

Occasionally patterns of behavior are so ingrained in groups it is helpful to organize differently so people have an opportunity to change behaviors. There are several proven strategies for engaging adults in collaborative work to improve professional discussion and growth.

Lesson Study – This involves small groups of teachers working together to plan, teach, observe, critique and revise a lesson. The goal is to systematically improve lesson quality and student learning. Both *Columbia University* (www.tc.columbia.edu/lessonstudy/lessonstudy.html) and the *Chicago Lesson Study Group* (http://www.lessonstudygroup.net/05lesson_study_resources.html) provide resources on lesson study.

Book Study – One way to engage teachers in professional conversation is to organize a book study group. In some schools everyone reads the same book. In others, teachers choose among several books and join colleagues who selected the same book. The goal is to read, discuss, and then use the information to strengthen and refine practice. Guidelines for organizing a book study are available from *Eye on Education* (www.eyoneducation.com/Book-Study-Group-FAQs) and the *Oklahoma Department of Education* (http://sde.state.ok.us/teacher/master/pdf/tips_study_group.pdf).

Looking at Student Work – Teams of teachers, either at a grade, course, team or departmental level examine authentic student work samples as a way to talk about assignments, assessments, expectations for students, and student learning. *The Annenberg Institute* (<http://www.lasw.org/>) and the *Coalition of Essential Schools* (www.essentialschools.org/resources/60) provide resources to get started.

Resources

Norms of Collaboration

(www.adaptiveschools.com)

This site provides numerous resources for how to build professional community including nurturing and sustaining the work of collaborative groups. The site includes two useful tools: This Week's Skill Builder (check out the archive) and the Seven Norms of Collaboration Toolkit (<http://www.adaptiveschools.com/inventories.htm> or <http://csi.boisestate.edu/Improvement/7%20Norms.pdf>)

Effective Meetings

(<http://www.effectivemeetings.com/meetingbasics/training.asp>)

This site provides many different resources on how facilitate productive meetings.

Coalition of Essential Schools

(http://www.essentialschools.org/horace_issues/87)

The Coalition provides many different resources for groups but this site provides ideas about using a cycle of inquiry to improve productivity of collaborative groups.

Annenberg Institute for School Reform

(www.annenberginstitute.org)

This site includes a set of Tools for School Improvement Planning that can be used to sustain a professional community. There are multiple tools for each task. Link to the section labeled *Tool Collection*.

(<http://www.annenberginstitute.org/tools/index.php>)

Related Research Briefs (www.educationpartnerships.org) – This site includes over 250 Research Briefs with several related to professional learning communities.

Professional Learning Communities -

<http://www.educationpartnerships.org/pdfs/ProfessionalLearningCommunityEPI.pdf>

Nurturing and Sustaining Professional Learning Communities -

<http://www.educationpartnerships.org/pdfs/SustainingPLCsEPI.pdf>

E P I: Developing successful, long-lasting business and education partnerships with a positive impact on America's youth.

www.educationpartnerships.org

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