CHAPTER 7

The Imperative of a Collaborative Culture

In every decade since the 1970s, researchers have concluded that one of the major obstacles to substantive school improvement in the United States is the long-standing tradition of teacher isolation. Since 1971, psychologist Seymour Sarason (1996) has reported that because teachers rarely have contact with one another, they "are psychologically alone even though they are in a densely populated setting" and that they adapt to being alone by creating a culture of *individuals* concerned about himself or herself rather than a culture of *group* concerned with the pursuit of the profession's best practices (p. 133). In his 1975 book, Dan Lortie describes how the isolation of classroom teachers prevents them from developing and sharing knowledge of their craft.

The 1980s brought John Goodlad's (1984) analysis of the work of teachers and his conclusion that teacher autonomy and isolation cause them to make decisions on curriculum, assessment, and instruction without the benefit of input from colleagues. Susan Rosenholtz (1986) notes two distinctly different school cultures: one in which collaboration, continuous improvement, and shared learning were the norm and the other in which autonomy and privatization left the question of quality teaching

> spend most of their time working in isolation from each other in self-contained classrooms. . . . The problem with this design is that it provides almost no opportunity for teachers to engage in continuous and sustained learning about their practice in the setting in which they actually work. . . . This disconnect between the requirements of learning to teach well and the structure of teachers' work life is fatal to any sustained process of instructional improvement. (p. 127)

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[illegible]ohn Goodlad (1984) finds that [illegible]chers prefer working in isolation because it allows them to conduct teaching in a cloak of privacy and autonomy, which, in turn, creates a powerful force for maintaining the status quo. Roland Barth (1991) laments that "God didn't create self-contained classrooms, fifty minute periods, and subjects taught in isolation. *We* did—because we find working alone safer and more preferable to working together" (p. 128).

Little has changed in the decades since these observations. Since 2010, I have asked tens of thousands of educators to complete this sentence if they had ever said it or heard it said in their school: "I wish they would just give me my room, give me my kids, and . . ." Each time, the audience answers with an enthusiastic "Leave me alone!"

Our profession will not benefit from yet another study calling attention to the need to overcome teacher isolation in order to achieve substantive school improvement. Nor will it benefit from further additions to the already overwhelming research base, from both inside and outside of education, on the importance of and benefits derived from a culture and climate that foster collaboration and collective responsibility. When the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, the National

know to be best practice, it will call for creating a collaborative culture and for commitments on the part of teachers and administrators alike to commit and contribute to such a culture. Three keys to moving forward will be assigning people to meaningful teams (rather than groups), providing time for educators to work together, and ensuring there is clarity regarding the right work.

Assigning People to Meaningful Teams

The fundamental structure of a school or district embracing the PLC process will be the collaborative team of educators rather than isolated classrooms or schools. The key term here is *team*. By *team*, I do not mean loosely connected groups that assemble for traditional grade-level, department, faculty, or parent-conference meetings. A team, by definition, operates differently from a group. Members of a team work *interdependently* to achieve *common goals* for which members are *mutually accountable*. Absent these three key elements, a group may be congenial or collegial, but its members are not a team. Groups don't become teams simply because that is what someone labels them. The act of meeting together does not define a team. Committees or task forces can serve useful purposes in a school or district, but they are not teams either.

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Since the fundamental purpose of a PLC is to ensure high levels of learning for students, the goals that team members establish should specifically call for evidence of improved learning for the students they serve (Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008). These goals are results oriented rather than activity oriented. "We will implement the Common Core State Standards for our grade level" could serve as a commitment made by a team or a strategy members will use to improve student achievement, but it is not a goal. The focus of that statement is what teachers will do. There is no reference to how it will impact student learning.

Note that the team may elect a state indicator, national indicator, local indicator, or combinations thereof. The goal may be for an entire year, a semester, or a unit. But in every instance, the team is committed to using past student achievement as a benchmark for improved student learning.

Goals that adhere to the SMART acronym should be established *by* teams rather than *for* teams. Teams that set their own goals are much more committed to achieving them than when someone else establishes the goal for the team (Pink, 2009). It is imperative, however, that every team establishes one or more goals because, by definition, the absence of a goal precludes members from functioning as a team. Furthermore, without goals that are immediately applicable to student learning, "teams will drift toward superficial discussions and truncated efforts" (Gallimore, Ermeling, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2009, p. 548).

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At the school level, the most powerful team structure is typically the grade-level team in elementary schools and course-specific or subject-area teams in secondary schools. These structures readily align with shared responsibility for student learning. Teams based on common content are much better suited to the process of clarifying essential outcomes, gathering evidence of student learning, assessing the effectiveness of varied instructional strategies, engaging in action research, and learning from one another (Forum for Education and Democracy, 2008; Fulton & Britton, 2011; Little & Bartlett, 2010; Stigler & Hiebert, 2009). Other structures such as interdisciplinary teams, vertical teams, or districtwide teams can also be effective, provided that team members share essential learning outcomes and their focus is on a collective effort to improve student achievement.

With a SMART goal in place, teams should clarify the commitments they are prepared to make to one another regarding how they will work to accomplish their goal. Common commitments

Common Preparation Time
Build the master schedule to provide daily common preparation periods for teachers of the same course or department. Each team should then designate one day each week to engage in collaborative, rather than individual, planning.

Parallel Scheduling
Schedule common preparation time by assigning the specialists to provide lessons to students across an entire grade level at the same time each day. The team should designate one day each week for collaborative planning. Some schools build back-to-back specials classes into the master schedule on each team's designated collaborative day, thus creating an extended block of time for the team to meet. Specials teachers must also be given time to collaborate.

Adjusted Start and End Time
Gain collaborative time by starting the workday early or extending the workday one day each week. In exchange for adding time to one end of the workday, teachers get the time back on the other end of that day. For example, on Tuesdays, the entire staff of Adlai Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, begins its workday at 7:30 a.m. rather than the normal 7:45 a.m. start time. From 7:30 to 8:30 a.m., the entire faculty engages in collaborative team meetings. Classes, which usually begin at 8:05 a.m., are delayed until 8:30 a.m. Students who can arrange for their own transportation arrive to school then. Buses run their regular routes so that no parent is inconvenienced and students are delivered to the school at 7:40 a.m. Upon their arrival they are supervised by administrative and noninstructional staff in a variety of optional activities (such as breakfast, library and computer research, open gym, study halls, and tutorials) until classes begin. To make up for the twenty-five minutes of lost instructional time, five minutes is trimmed from five of the eight fifty-minute class periods. The school day ends at the usual time (3:25 in the afternoon), and again buses run on their regular schedules. Because they began work fifteen minutes early (7:30 rather than 7:45), Stevenson teachers are free to leave fifteen minutes earlier than the normal conclusion of their workday (3:30 rather than 3:45). By making these minor adjustments to the schedule one day each week, the entire faculty is guaranteed an hour of collaborative planning without extending their workday or workweek by a single minute.

Source: DuFour et al., 2010, pp. 125–127.

Figure 7.1: How schools are addressing the challenge of time.

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true even with the steps that have been taken in recent years to provide time for collaboration.

Providing adequate time for professional collaboration will require a re-examination of long-standing assumptions both by policymakers and educators. Policymakers must recognize that developing curriculum, planning lessons, creating assessments, analyzing evidence of student learning to inform professional practice, and engaging in action research are vital to the teaching and learning process and are best addressed when teachers work together rather than in isolation.

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Educators must consider abandoning unexamined practices and positions that have been exempt from questioning. They are correct to value individual teacher preparation time, but it should not be viewed as a fundamental right on par with life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. There is no evidence that reflective preparation and teaching by an isolated teacher have a positive impact on student learning; however, there is abundant evidence that reflective teaching is powerful when it is collective and based on evidence of student learning (Hattie, 2009). Yet there are educators who insist they must have five hours of personal planning time each week while they resist devoting even one hour to collaborative work. The only rationale for this position is "This is how we have always done it." Tradition and the status quo trump evidence of best practice.

Something that is even more sacred to educators than preparation time is the imperative of small class sizes. Everyone—teachers, administrators, parents, and sometimes even policymakers—is in favor of small class size. I recognize that I may be branded a heretic for the following statement, nevertheless: *there is little evidence to suggest that, beyond the primary grades, smaller class size has a positive impact on student achievement.*

basis during their contractual day, it is becoming more difficult for school administrators to assert they are unable to find time for teachers to collaborate. No one "finds" time for collaboration; we must *make* time for collaboration. It is disingenuous for any district or school to claim that collaboration is a priority and then fail to provide adequate time for educators to engage in collaboration. What has become abundantly clear, however, is that merely providing time for educators to collaborate will not improve student achievement unless they devote their attention and energy to the right work.

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Avoiding the Real Work of Collaborative Teams

Members of a profession are obligated to seek out and apply the best practices in their field to meet the needs of those they serve. In light of the preponderance of evidence supporting collaborative structures and culture and the absence of evidence demonstrating the benefits of teacher isolation, the collaborative team should be the fundamental structure of every school. Yet there are schools and districts that ignore readily available common knowledge and continue with a traditional structure that results in teacher isolation. They assign a greater priority to preserving the status quo than they do to supporting student and adult learning.

There are also schools and districts that look for ways to provide the illusion of collaboration while avoiding the real work of a collaborative team. They make participation on a collaborative team optional because individual comfort and happiness trump best practice.

They accept the idea that it is impossible for a teacher to collaborate if no one in the building teaches what he or she teaches. It is evident that proximity does not ensure collaboration. Two teachers can be in classrooms that are side by side yet work in

Achieving Clarity Regarding the Right Work

Educators can sincerely believe that ensuring all students learn at high levels is their fundamental mission, but genuine conviction and a sense of moral purpose do not ensure that they are clear on how to proceed. A major obstacle to successful implementation of the PLC process is the lack of clarity regarding what that process entails. Over and over, I see schools and districts that claim to be professional learning communities that do none of the things that PLCs actually do.

A survey by the Boston Consulting Group (2014) on teacher perceptions of effective professional development illustrates the point. According to the survey, teachers prefer professional development that is relevant to their context, helps them plan and improve their instruction, is teacher driven, includes hands-on strategies applicable to their classrooms, is highly interactive, is sustained over time, and recognizes that teachers are professionals with valuable insights. These are the exact conditions that effective collaborative teams create in high-performing PLCs. In fact, the 7 percent of the teachers in the survey who saw themselves as members of strong collaborative cultures report significant benefits in their day-to-day work in key areas, such as planning lessons, developing teaching skills and content, and aligning curriculum and expectations. They report "dramatically higher satisfaction with day-to-day work" and their "perceived effectiveness" (Boston Consulting Group, 2014, p. 8). Educators who actually engage in the right work in their collaborative teams find it exceptionally valuable.

But when the consulting group asked teachers to assess the professional development in their own districts, they gave their lowest marks to what they called professional learning communities. Teachers report that in their district, working in a team is just "another meeting," a place to "share their frustrations," or "a