

Collaboration

Here are three definitions that are central to your work as a Teacher Leader. Read them carefully and think about what each term means as you put the Teacher Leadership Standards into practice in your Tasks. For example, the definition of **collaboration** includes both **professionals and stakeholders**. Stakeholders could be people from a variety of categories, depending on the work: students, parents, other school and system personnel, local government, local helping agencies, industries in the community, etc.

Collaboration

Ongoing communication among professionals and stakeholders using a variety of formats (e.g., conferences, email, conference calls) to discuss, plan, and deliver course work, experiences, competencies, knowledge, and skills.

Collaborative Support

Providing assistance to a group of educators or other stakeholders working together toward a common goal(s); assistance may include organization, guidance, supplying resources, or making connections with additional support opportunities.

Collaborative Teams

Collaborative teams are groups of educational colleagues working toward common goals.

The following two articles provide specific strategies you can use to promote successful collaboration.

Six Keys to Successful Collaboration

By Braden Welborn

March 14, 2012 from Education Week

Teacher collaboration—when it's good, it's very, very good, but when it's bad, it's horrid. Many educators believe that implementation of the Common Core Standards offers an unprecedented opportunity for collaboration among teachers. What do educators already know about the benefits and pitfalls of collaboration?

Marsha, a science teacher from Kansas, posed this question to colleagues on the Center for Teaching Quality's [Teacher Leaders Network](#) discussion board. Drawing on their own successful (and miserable) experiences, teachers identified key attributes of effective collaboration:

Clarity of Purpose

Top-down mandates for collaboration often fail. But systemic collaboration is not necessarily impossible—just tricky to design. And clarity of purpose is critical.

Some teachers noted that there are times—like when data shows students are struggling with a certain subject area—when mandated collaboration can work, as long as everyone understands its purpose.

Anne, a former state teacher of the year, described how she'd seen a school district achieve remarkable results after one middle school principal formed "small learning teams of teachers to accomplish a specific purpose." Their goal? Improving reading instruction. The teams cut across all instructional staff and had training in how to collaborate successfully. They studied about reading strategies together; designed, implemented, and assessed lessons; and made adjustments. All teams exchanged "big ideas" with each other

regularly. The process spread from school to school—and the district saw impressive achievement gains.

"So I actually don't think professional learning communities have to be made up of volunteers who see the value of collaboration at first," Anne said. "Sometimes collaboration has to be mandated in order to ratchet up teacher learning in areas of student need. But if it is mandated, there must be training in the 'how to' and a culture of positive support, coupled with time, recognition, and incentives."

Individual Commitment

A high school English teacher quoted a blues standard: "If it don't fit, don't force it." She pointed out, "Each member of the collaboration team would have to be convinced that their time and energy would benefit students, and there would have to be a process of coming to real consensus on what the intended outcomes for students should be.

Commitment to that baseline focus would be necessary to hold the group together long enough for trust to develop."

Time

Bill, a Massachusetts teacher, observed that there's a difference between "the professional, collegial trust I'll give anyone on first blush" and the deeper kind of trust that is necessary for collaboration. And the latter takes time.

Time. This word came up over and over again—along with "money." As Steve in Vermont put it, "Sooner or later, boards and administrators will have to confront the fact that if collaboration is desirable, it will have to be purchased, either with cold, hard cash or by eliminating vestigial tasks that don't contribute to student learning."

Many teachers had seen "good ideas" fail because they were mandated system-wide by those who underestimated the time needed to support the effort. One teacher offered a highly technical term for such scenarios: "a hot mess."

Also important is how collaboration time is structured—or not structured.

Steve's district has mandated "collaboration times" before and after school—but they are highly scripted, with protocols and reports. He suggests a different approach: "Why not create unstructured times in the school work day and avoid filling that time with stuff? Then encourage people to break out of their routines and talk with each other. See if it happens organically."

Indeed, several teachers reported that their best collaborative experiences took place informally during shared planning time. Bill explained: "So many good initiatives for the school emerged from us bouncing ideas off each other randomly as we stumbled on them, then built off each other's excitement."

Understanding How to Collaborate and Communicate

Ernie, a Nevada educator, pointed out that the effectiveness of shared planning time depends on teachers' understanding of how to use that time.

Noting that Learning Forward's [standards for professional learning](#) address this, Ernie wrote, "Unfortunately, so much of what we do in schools comes in a neat little package with checksheets—and teachers aren't encouraged to dig deep into discussing their practice and creating strategies to address the needs of their students." Some teachers may need guidance in how to make the most of opportunities to collaborate.

Gail, an instructional coach, agreed. Active listening (as opposed to multi-tasking) is key: "When group members truly listen to one another, they are able to communicate their ongoing regard for one another and build the trust that allows them to collaborate effectively."

Susan in Virginia added that establishing norms can help keep things running smoothly, even though some group members can find this to be an "unnecessary formality."

Supportive Administrators

At Kathie's school in California, the collaboration opportunity afforded by early release for students on Tuesdays was "a total waste of time in most departments." But that changed when a new principal informed teachers "how close we were to being taken over by the

district due to flat test scores" and "made it clear that teachers were accountable for improvement, but also trusted to come up with their own solutions." The principal "added fun to the mix as well." The results? Focused, meaningful collaboration quickly led to significant increases in test scores.

Freedom to Explore

Freedom to explore can refer to the ability to choose one's own professional learning community—within the school building or even beyond it. As a couple of teachers asked, why not look to Twitter as a home for substantial collaboration?

Even when collaboration occurs in formal groups, a skilled facilitator can amp up the freedom factor. A group at Mary's school was focused on improving writing instruction, but the leader often seized upon ideas and (without discussing them) immediately began planning for implementation. Mary cringed, thinking, "That is the way to kill a good idea." When the leader shifted her approach to give teachers more voice and room for creativity, lively discussion and action resulted.

There's no magic formula for successful collaboration. But this dialogue demonstrates that teachers know a great deal about what works—and what doesn't.

Collaboration: Closing the Effective Teaching Gap

Access the following link to this article with specific strategies for positive and powerful collaboration:

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED509717.pdf>