

FOCUS

A Newsletter for Selected School Board Members in Washington State

Teacher Collaboration

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News from Your Schools...

Teachers Collaborate to Improve Student Learning

In the past, professional development for teachers often took place outside of schools. Teachers sat in hotel or district conference rooms and listened to experts.

Today, most educators and board members understand that effective professional development (meaning the kind that improves student learning) is generally site-based, long-term, and directly related to teachers' practice. It's an ongoing part of a teacher's work week, not something that's tacked on. And it usually involves teachers working together.

Teacher collaboration is a huge shift for a profession that for years was almost completely private. But it's a critical one if we are really serious about improving student achievement.

Faculties at many of your schools now spend time in collaborative activities. These might include sharing student work, talking about students they share, integrating curriculum, team teaching. But in each case, teachers have the opportunity to look at how they teach—what works, what doesn't work, what they can do better.

Talking about students

Mike Goodfellow, Enumclaw board member, grins when he shares how, at a recent open house for his high school's new small schools, he overheard a conversation between a student, his parent, and a history teacher. After the history teacher said something about the student's *math* grade, the student said to his parent, "They get together and talk about us all the time now."

For Mike, the anonymity of many students in big comprehensive high schools was one compelling reason to

"More than almost any other factor, the sense of a professional learning community in schools enhances student achievement."

Moffett (2000)

embark on the high school reinvention journey, so the student's comment delighted him. It told him that teachers were collaborating more in one very important area.

Teachers have always cared about their students and have shared their concerns with each other in lunchrooms and hallways. But now, some faculties are using more formal processes to focus on individual students.

Susan Songstad, a teacher at Mariner's LEAP Academy, reports that her faculty uses a protocol called "Students of Concern" to identify and discuss individual students. She says, "While it can be comforting to hear that other teachers are struggling to reach a particular student, sometimes we find there is one teacher for whom that kid is doing well. Then the rest of us can learn what that teacher is doing that seems to work."

Susan adds, "Every so often you'll learn something huge about a kid from another teacher. For example, a parent has died or they have some other really hard circumstance in their life and you go... 'Wow, no wonder.' Some behaviors you've noticed suddenly make sense."

At Foss' Academy #1, teacher Francey Joslin says that after their discussions about particular students, teachers volunteer to follow-up whenever possible. She tells of helping one struggling student set up a student-led conference

with all his teachers. Result: improved performance on the student's next progress report.

Sharing student work

Teachers who look—in isolation—at the work their students are doing and are disappointed may not know how to change their practice to get better work.

Teachers who look together at student work and give feedback to each other are more likely to try out new practices. "We are smarter as a group than we are as individuals," says Eve Datisman, Forks High librarian and English teacher.

Like teachers in many schools, Eve belongs to a Critical Friends Group, a small group of teachers who commit to work together regularly to examine student work and teacher practices. CFGs provide teachers with a structure to offer and receive feedback in a setting where there is mutual trust and respect.

According to Eve, when teachers bring lessons to their CFGs, "there are many eyes looking and many mouths asking hard questions like: 'Where is the lesson headed? Are the activities relevant? How will you assess the understanding of your students?' We are certainly focusing more on what the students need not only in

continued...

"We need to create contexts in which collaborative work can be sustained. Some people think of it as a matter of 'finding time'—but it's also a matter of having a program that teachers [are] able to integrate into the daily routines of school life over the long term."

Stigler (2002)

Collaboration, continued

terms of content but also tailoring the work to their learning styles.”

Val Giles, also a Forks teacher, CFG member and veteran of scores of professional development experiences, says, “This is the first time in my teaching career of over 20 years that the focus of the professional development has been on teacher practice and student performance.”

He adds that since the Forks CFGs were established, some teachers are showing up in each other’s classrooms to talk about instructional challenges they are facing.

Val believes his teaching practice now includes more personalization and rigor. He says, “On the one hand, I’m much more open to allowing students to capitalize on their personal interests, and to negotiating the product and assessment of their learning to meet their needs. On the other, it’s become easier to hand a project back to the student and say, ‘it isn’t good enough,’ putting the responsibility on the student to produce quality.”

How long will it take before changes in practice show up in increased scores on high-stakes tests?

Eve isn’t sure, but she says, “I’m already seeing incremental progress for individual students. All of my students are writing a

little better than they were, and they are less hesitant about challenging an idea.”

While Val thinks measurable improvement could occur within two years of sustained effort, he’s also seeing changes.

Recently, in the class of a colleague, he watched a student share what she had learned from a unit that the teacher had worked on in his CFG.

I Used To Think...Now I Think

After spending a day discussing and sharing collaboration issues, teachers from schools with Gates grants used the prompt, “I used to think...now I think...” Here are just a few of their thoughts:

“I used to think collaboration was just team teaching. Now I think collaboration is a whole-staff process involving trust and common focus with the goal of improving student learning (even just one student’s learning).”

“I used to think collaboration was used primarily for curriculum. Now I think there are many reasons we need to collaborate for our students’ learning, for our professional development, and to create ownership in our school and specific school focus.”

“I used to think that professional development was a place, an event, requiring an expert imparting his knowledge to me. Now I think it is rooted in relationship and dialogue, in professional learning communities with us and our goals at the center.”

“It was clear that the teacher’s delivery had been more effective,” he says, “because the student was at least conscious of the purpose of the unit and the learning objectives.”

“That’s immediate improvement,” he concludes.

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