



*A Facilitator's Guide to*  
**Professional Learning Teams**

*Creating on-the-job opportunities  
for teachers to continually  
learn and grow*

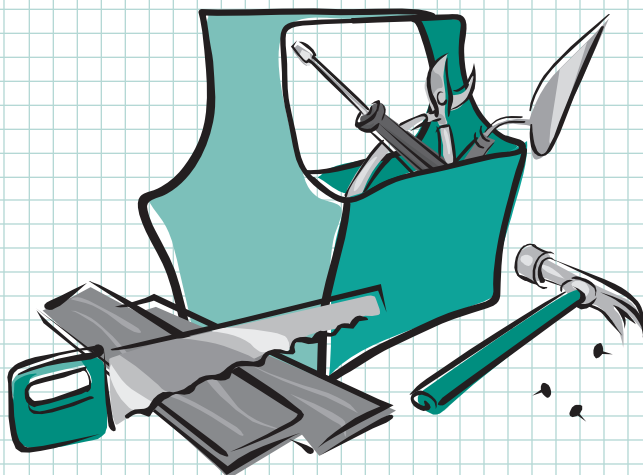
**SERVE**

*Improving Learning through  
Research & Development*



# A Facilitator's Guide to Professional Learning Teams

*Creating on-the-job opportunities  
for teachers to learn and grow*



**SERVE**<sup>TM</sup>  
*Improving Learning through  
Research & Development*

# A Facilitator's Guide to Professional Learning Teams

© **SERVE, 2005**

Proprietary—Not for copying without the express permission of SERVE



Associated with the  
School of Education,  
University of North  
Carolina at Greensboro

**First Printing, 2005**

**Produced by SERVE**

**Written by**

**Anne Jolly, Senior Education Program Specialist, SERVE**

**Edited by**

**Karen DeMeester, Ph.D., Senior Program Specialist, SERVE**

**Donna Nalley, Ph.D., Director of Publications, SERVE**

**Designed by**

**Tracy Hamilton, Assistant Program Specialist, SERVE**

The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

This document was produced with funding from the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED-01-CO-0015.

# Table of Contents

**Foreword ..... iv**

**Introduction ..... v**

The Story of a Teacher ..... vi

The Story of a Professional Learning Team ..... x

How to Use This Book .....xvi

A Note to the Facilitator ..... xvii

## **Prepare to Do the Work**

Step 1: Build the Foundation ..... 1-1

Step 2: Preview the Process .....2-1

Step 3: Organize the Teams .....3-1

## **Do the Work**

Step 4: Define Team Expectations .....4-1

Step 5: Analyze the Data .....5-1

Step 6: Plan for Learning and Action .....6-1

Step 7: Conduct Successful Meetings .....7-1

Step 8: Maintain the Momentum .....8-1

## **Examine Results**

Step 9: Assess Team Progress .....9-1

## **Sustain the Teams**

Step 10: Facilitation 101 ..... 10-1

**Resources ..... R-1**

# Foreword

Since writing *Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement* nearly eight years ago, I have learned that the attributes associated with such communities—supportive and shared leadership, learning and its applications, shared values and vision, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice—are not easily introduced into schools steeped in traditional ways of doing business. The “schools-as-cells-and-bells” and “teacher-as-solo-artist” mental models are just too strong.

So I will paraphrase now what I said then: Professional development is an entry point for changing teachers’ mental models. Earlier research finds teachers’ attitudes and abilities are shaped and reinforced not through traditional models of staff development but in the contexts in which they work and learn, including the communities formed by their relationships with other professionals. How, then, do we organize to create and sustain such communities of professional development?

Part of the answer may lay in this most impressive and comprehensive guide written for SERVE by Anne Jolly. I believe that this guide can make a real contribution to the profession and to those working on becoming professional learning communities. I believe that the professional learning community is not only an excellent professional development strategy but is also essentially a first-rate continuous improvement process. Anne has taken the essentials of an improvement or reform process and translated them ever so well into the activities of a learning community of professionals in the school. Thus, the process should be somewhat familiar to educators and a useful idea in this new setting.

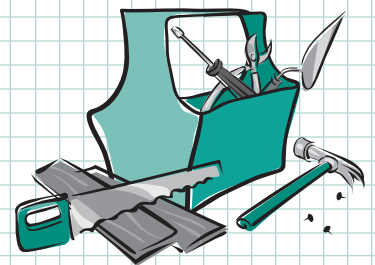
I am impressed with the thoroughness and comprehensiveness of this guide. The steps are very clear, concrete, and extensive and provide a splendid, formalized method to create the building blocks of professional learning among communities of practitioners. I believe that this product is an excellent addition to what we have available, and I can see myself using it.

Shirley M. Hord, Ph.D.  
Scholar Emerita, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory  
Austin, Texas

July 2004

# Introduction

<b>The Story of a Teacher .....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>The Story of a Professional Learning Team .....</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>How to Use This Book .....</b>	<b>xvi</b>
<b>A Note to the Facilitator .....</b>	<b>xvii</b>





The story is told of a young World War II soldier who decided to take a short walk in camp the night before a major battle. General Dwight D. Eisenhower approached and quietly walked beside the young man. The general's identity went undetected. "What are you thinking about, son?" asked the general. "I guess I'm afraid," the young man replied. "Well, so am I," said Eisenhower. "Let us walk together and perhaps we will draw strength from each other."

— DuFour and Eaker,  
*Professional Learning  
Communities at Work*



For a more detailed description of the following events, see "Reforming Instruction Through Collaboration: A Better Method for Informing and Sustaining School Change"

—*Middle Ground*, February 2001,  
pp. 28–31

## The Story of a Teacher

When I entered the teaching profession, a set of unwritten rules seemed to govern teacher behaviors and interactions.

- 📌 You are responsible for *your* students and *your* subject. (Translation: Don't tread on other teachers' territory. You take care of your business, and they will handle theirs.)
- 📌 Find efficient teaching routines and methods, and stick with them. (Translation: Find a comfortable way to teach, and avoid change.)
- 📌 Be wary of changes in curriculum and instruction—these, too, shall pass. (Translation: students and society always will have the same basic needs, so just ignore the new-fangled stuff.)

At first, this peculiar way of thinking actually made sense to me. After all, these beliefs were rooted in long-standing education traditions and deeply embedded in school culture. Before long, however, reality hit. I realized that, however well-prepared I felt when I entered the classroom, I definitely needed more knowledge and skill to help my students learn better. Instead of being cautious of changes, I found myself grabbing for new ideas. As often as I could, I made my way into my colleagues' classrooms, asking questions and running ideas by them. Try as I might, I never found that mysterious "efficient teaching routine" that I could use with students time after time.

After 12 years of teaching, I took a three-year leave of absence from the classroom to work in a teaching/professional development role. In 1998 I re-entered the classroom, invigorated with even more enthusiasm and anticipation than I felt with my first position. This time I felt *really* prepared to teach. I was armed with a toolkit of strategies to deal with a new generation of students. I was ready to tackle the challenges of rapidly shifting demographics and changing academic requirements. I felt sure I had the knowledge and skills to prepare young adolescents for a complex, fast-paced, high-tech workforce. I was wired for action!

By the end of the first month, I looked at my students hard at work on their science assignment and realized that, instead of revolutionizing my classroom practices, I had fallen back into many old teaching patterns. Caught up in the familiar day-to-day routines



and expectations that still dominate school cultures, I found it surprisingly hard to put new routines and innovating teaching ideas into operation. While I found this situation perturbing, I was curious as well. Why wasn't I rapidly transforming my teaching practices with flexible, innovative strategies that I knew would work better? I felt knowledgeable and motivated. What, exactly, was my problem? Were there other teachers who wanted to change but who, like me, found change like swimming up a waterfall?

Three ideas proposed by Linda Darling-Hammond made a lot of sense to me as I considered my dilemma. Darling-Hammond works extensively in the area of professional development. She and her colleagues made the following recommendations in a September 1996 report for the National Commission on Teaching For America's Future.

- Change in instruction begins with learning new ideas, followed by planning, trying out new strategies, getting feedback, and reflecting *together* with other teachers to learn from experience and refine practice.
- School organizational patterns must allow teachers to work *collaboratively* to address student needs and to develop a shared feeling of responsibility for students.
- School schedules and staffing must create regular blocks of time in teachers' schedules so they can work *together* on teaching and growing professionally.

The isolated classroom scenario simply wasn't working for me anymore. My students needed to learn more material and new skills faster, and I needed to improve my teaching expertise and make permanent changes in my teaching practice. I wondered what it would be like to work in an environment that encourages teacher collaboration, support, and personal growth. What would happen if teachers worked *collectively* to increase our expertise and change our teaching practices? Together, could we break the chains of tradition and forge a new way of doing business?

With the encouragement of an astute principal and grants from two organizations—the SERVE Regional Educational Laboratory and the Mobile (AL) Area Education Foundation—I set out to answer these questions. Two middle schools served as action research sites. After the first year, both schools had functioning collaborative teacher learning teams. In both schools, student achievement scores increased in team focus areas (although other variables factored into

that success). Members of one of the school teams—Judy Duke, Phyllis Hartselle, Derek Hyder, and Karen Ryals—graciously allowed me to relate their struggles and successes as they learned to work collaboratively toward a common instructional goal. I've included their story (pages x-xv) to illustrate both the promise and the potential pitfalls of collaborative work.

Intrigued by the possibilities of teachers working together regularly and systematically, I began working to develop, establish, support, and document a process of teacher collaboration in other schools. The collaborative teacher groups described in this book are called *learning teams* for two reasons: (1) teacher and student *learning* are at the heart of the process, and (2) teams are groups of people who share a common goal and work together to achieve that goal. The learning teams process centers around the belief that teachers are the professionals in the best position to design instruction that works for their students. Since some schools group students into clusters they call “learning teams,” I refer to the teacher groups I work with as *Professional Learning Teams*, to make the distinction.

This guidebook provides tools and information that can help facilitators establish Professional Learning Teams in schools and help teachers who commit to this process to stay on track throughout the year. What I offer the reader are the results of my own search for professional community and my work with committed teachers and principals who started learning teams in their schools. We learned as many of you are learning—out of a need and by trial and experiment. I share these tools and ideas in the hope that you will become accomplished in transforming schools into a place where teachers continually learn and grow.

Much information in this guidebook has been pulled together from ideas I read, tried, and found to work. I, therefore, owe credit for many ideas and procedures in this guidebook to a number of wise and wonderful people. The collaborative process described here was originally adapted from a professional development approach designed by Carlene Murphy in 1986. Her book, *Whole-Faculty Study Groups: A Powerful Way to Change Schools and Enhance Learning* (1998), was a valuable resource for the project, as was her advice. Robert Garmston provided deeper insight into collaborative team work through his seminars and his stimulating book, coauthored with Bruce Wellman, *The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups* (1999). Richard DuFour will also recognize ideas in this guidebook from his workshop and book, coauthored by Robert

Eaker, *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* (1998).

Shirley Hord and D'Ette Cowan with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) generously supplied resources and information from SEDL's work with professional learning communities. Ruth Ash, dean of education at Samford University in Birmingham, AL, and Maurice Persall, dean of Samford's graduate program, spent hours sharing their work on Formative Leadership. Their sound thinking helped me decide how to implement and facilitate the learning team process. Members of the SERVE staff, including Rick Basom, Steve Bingham, Pam Finney, Jane Griffin, Barbara Howard, Wendy McColskey, Nancy McMunn, Jerry Natkin, and Jean Williams acted as valuable sounding boards, asked the hard questions, and worked with me on the initial program logic. Pam Finney developed some of the evaluation tools and helped with site evaluations. Carolyn Akers, executive director of the Mobile Area Education Foundation; Jack Sanders, former executive director of SERVE; and Don Stringfellow, my former principal, believed in this project and made it happen. Brenda Haskew, professional development coordinator for the Mobile County Public School System, supplied support and wise mentoring throughout the early going. Brenda Litchfield, professor of Instructional Development and Design at the University of South Alabama, provided the initial inspiration to write this guidebook and spent hours editing my early attempts. Other sources of ideas and information came from books and articles listed in the "Resources" section.

My heartfelt appreciation to my mother and language arts teacher, Rebecca Baker, who diligently read and edited each word of this book, as she has all of my writings. Special thanks also to Joan Richardson, director of publications for the National Staff Development Council for her expertise and encouragement, and to my initial editor and friend, John Norton, who expertly, resolutely, and tenaciously steered me through the ins and outs of the initial writing-for-publication process.





As you start the challenging job of creating lasting changes in your school, be flexible, ready to accept detours, and determined to stay the course. Above all, be ready to offer encouragement and support to teachers as they engage in the hardest task you could possibly ask of them—the task of changing their teaching practice in the middle of the daily brushfires that erupt in classrooms and the status-quo mentality that often permeates schools and school systems. The real winners will, of course, be your students.

## The Story of a Professional Learning Team

*This story is based on an analysis of logs from this Professional Learning Team.*

Four seventh-grade teachers at Cranford Burns Middle School in Mobile, AL, began the learning team process by developing a learning plan with a goal to improve student writing. Lacking clear guidance on how to approach this, they initially focused entirely on student learning rather than teacher learning. For example, their team goal included objectives such as

Students need to:

-  Demonstrate ability to identify the main idea and supporting ideas.
-  Use mechanics of writing and correct grammar to express ideas clearly.
-  Construct good paragraphs.
-  Summarize information concisely without paraphrasing or plagiarism.

Teachers planned activities such as developing pre- and post-tests for summarization skills, sharing teaching strategies, correlating strategies between subject areas, creating opportunities for students to make their writings public, maintaining student portfolios, and looking for teacher resource materials.

Teachers also established team norms that included a regular meeting time and place, arriving on time, and being prepared. They agreed to respect each other's ideas and to establish a "safe place" for expressing concerns and opinions. Norms included listening as well as sharing, not being judgmental, sharing the team responsibilities equally, and preventing interruptions in order to focus intently on team activities.

### Kicking Off

Learning team meetings kicked off the first week with a discussion of rubrics and a look at student writing samples. During the first meeting, team members looked at student prewriting samples, developed guidelines for student writing, and correlated some writing activities.

During the next two meetings, teachers struggled to find real value in their collaborative efforts. Each teacher taught a different subject, and while willing to work together to increase students' writing skills, the teachers were uncertain how to proceed. The primary question that surfaced during their first meetings was not surprising but no less frustrating for its predictability: "What are we supposed to be doing?"

By the end of the fourth meeting, team members felt their whole approach to the collaborative process was too narrowly focused on traditional student objectives. They realized that they were missing the real point of learning team meetings—professional growth. In addition, they were now struggling with a new problem. This teaching team had 11 students identified as "gifted" and others who were high achievers. For the most part, these students were unmotivated, underachieving, and created problems in class. The teachers decided that, as a learning team, they were learning and doing nothing new or different to reach their students. They needed to move in a fresh direction.

Team members decided to rewrite their team plan to address the need to motivate and challenge the *high-performing students* in their classrooms. They felt that developing successful approaches and experiences for high-performing students would provide them with creative, stimulating strategies that would motivate students at all levels to achieve at higher levels. With this "out-of-the-box" approach, teachers began breaking new ground at the school and possibly in the school system.

### **Learning, Planning, and Changing**

Team members realized right away that they lacked the knowledge and skills needed to implement their plan. Instead of focusing on student learning objectives, they focused on teacher learning objectives that would help them broaden their own knowledge base. They planned to:

- Identify materials and sources of information for working with gifted and high-achieving students.
- Learn and develop new teaching strategies for engaging and involving these students.
- Apply what they were learning in their classrooms and monitor results.

During the next few learning team meetings, team members examined activities already underway (i.e., Science Olympiad) that could




provide challenging interdisciplinary experiences for their students. The teachers also assumed a learner mode as they searched for information on modifying their regular classroom curricula for high-ability students. Each team member read and shared current research articles on facilitating learning for gifted students in the regular classroom. Through this reading/sharing process, the team began focusing on strategies related to open-ended questions, stimulating higher-order thinking skills, and encouraging students to express and defend personal opinions.

Through ongoing research, team members began to build a toolkit of new strategies and ideas for teaching. Members incorporated group research projects for gifted and motivated students. They decided to allow students to do several individual projects based on interests as well as projects related to topics being studied. The team developed rubrics and guidelines for these projects.

The toolkit grew as team members began modifying assignments and offering optional assignments that allowed students to build on their strengths rather than focus on their weaknesses. They also offered compact assignment options for students who finished work quickly and correctly and scored high but did not show high ability and high interest in their daily work. Teachers established a plan for conferencing individually with these students, outlining what each student was to do, and establishing time frames for students to complete their work.

Learning team members packed their toolkit with information about new cooperative learning designs. They used both homogeneous groupings and heterogeneous groupings, depending on the nature of the task. They examined case studies for successful elements they could incorporate into their practice. As they progressed, team members continued to feel a need for more extensive training and knowledge and decided to involve the school's gifted teacher as a consultant.

As the team members researched, planned, shared, and learned, they were already trying new strategies in their classrooms, sharing results with the entire team, and asking for advice from one another.

 The math teacher offered students an alternative assignment option—a data analysis involving open-ended, thought-provoking questions that students had to defend with logic. She reported students responded well to the assignment, had a higher interest level, and were more engaged.

At this point, teachers began engaging in a different level of collaboration. Instead of trying individual strategies and sharing, they decided to begin using the same strategies across disciplines and comparing results.

- The team developed a cross-curricular approach to encourage all students to advance in higher-order thinking and began an intensive focus on using open-ended questions across disciplines. They observed that many students tended to be strongly opinionated but were unable to support their opinions through reason. Team members looked for ways to help students engage in logical thinking processes. They also noted that when responding to open-ended questions, students were more interactive and took more ownership in their learning and that classes became more “student-powered.”
- The learning team members continued to work together to develop the open-ended question technique and incorporated this into student writing assignments. Each teacher used open-ended questions as lead-ins for writing activities. At this point, team members also began a search for rubrics or other assessment methods to use in evaluating responses to open-ended questions.

During learning team meetings, teachers continued to read and share information from the research on instructional strategies for high-performing students. They examined and developed methods for encouraging students to explore a topic in depth, ways to involve students in peer-editing groups, and ways of engaging students in publishing their own work.

At this point, the team again reevaluated its learning plan. Always hungry for more resources, the team brought in the teacher of gifted students for specific suggestions. With her help, team members targeted library resources, including videos and online research. The next learning team meeting took place in the library as the learning team members continued to focus on increasing their grasp of best educational practices.

New “out-of-the-box” teaching ideas began to dominate learning team meetings. Teachers began providing all students with optional assignments they could choose in place of a traditional assignment. The social studies teacher reported offering his classes a challenging,



Many students tended to be strongly opinionated but were unable to support their opinions through reason.

optional assignment originally intended to motivate and stimulate his high-performing students. To his surprise, over 90% of students of all levels opted for this more difficult assignment, completed it, and turned it in. The quality of the students' work exceeded that of their regular assignments, and students of all levels reported they enjoyed doing it. The teacher calculated that 84% of his regular students made high scores on the more challenging assignment, compared to 86% of high-achievers. He concluded that, in this case at least, the optional assignment approach significantly reduced the achievement gap between his low- and high-achieving students.

Following through with the optional assignment approach, the language arts teacher offered students the option of engaging in dramatic presentations or preparing children's books rather than traditional book reports. She also offered choices in other areas and reported that, with the use of optional assignments, a higher percentage of students turned in work, and their work quality was generally better.

In math classes, students worked together in heterogeneous groups to design surveys, collect and analyze data, and make class presentations. The math teacher found all students were more actively engaged in determining what to do and how to do it, and they tended to take more ownership for their learning. She also provided opportunities for students who mastered mathematics concepts quickly and accurately to work together during class on optional assignments. She met with these students ahead of time and explained that these alternative assignments would be more difficult and mean more work. Nevertheless, all high-achieving students opted for the alternative assignments and performed well. The teacher felt this provided a way to reward and encourage students who did good work. In the meantime, she was able to direct more class time toward helping students who did not master the math concepts as easily.

The learning team also decided to initiate an information exchange with students in a Japanese school. This initiative provided their students with additional opportunities for differentiated assignments. Science students were preparing brochures on local ecology as a way to start this international "conversation."

Teachers reported the learning team process engaged them in regular, systematic thinking about their teaching practice so they could better meet the needs of their students. As they learned how to challenge high-achievers without simply giving them more work, their instructional strategies influenced the learning of all students. Team



members also reported that the learning team process provided them with the confidence to experiment with innovative teaching strategies they might otherwise avoid. The team structure provided the support they needed to stick with these new strategies rather than to fall back into a more comfortable teaching routine. As one teacher put it, “A lot of this, I would not have tried by myself. We challenge each other.”

### Looking Back

In looking back on the changes that occurred during this year of heightened collaboration and support, a team member remarked: “Kids are changing. They are not like they were when I started teaching. Teachers need to make adjustments and to challenge all kids. Kids will rise to expectations, and teachers are as guilty as students in believing that some cannot achieve.”

Perhaps one of the most rewarding spin-offs of the learning team’s efforts was the high degree of parent satisfaction with their children’s learning experiences. Parents provided positive feedback throughout the year. On Teacher Appreciation Day, parents sent these team members so much food that the teachers were hard pressed to find a space for it in their team room.

Teachers acknowledged that changing their practice was hard work and took a lot of time. Yet, they found this to be a powerful and effective professional development experience. They plan to continue systematically collaborating, reflecting, experimenting, documenting discussions and classroom applications, and continually learning how to improve their teaching.

In reading this story for accuracy, the teachers on this learning team acknowledged that, while the information is accurate, they feel their efforts are a work in progress rather than an exemplary model. They are correct about this being a work in progress. Many learning teams are doing a noteworthy job. This case study is offered as a type of road map illustrating one way a team of teachers began thinking about their practice, changing, and growing professionally as a result of working together to address student needs. The real winners were their students.

## How to Use This Book

This guidebook provides a set of tools for implementing Professional Learning Teams (PLTs) with an entire faculty or part of a faculty. The book is organized in 10 short chapters, or steps. Each step features a variety of tools to use while establishing, maintaining, and evaluating a specific part of the learning team process. Steps 1 and 2 establish a rationale for learning teams and provide a brief overview of the process. Each subsequent step explains a different part of that process. Step 3 gives suggestions for organizing the teams and finding resources and time for them to meet. Steps 4 and 5 guide teams in establishing ground rules for their meetings and determining via data analysis where they most need to focus their instructional efforts. Steps 7 and 8 give teachers concrete ideas for how to engage in the real work of the teams and support teams as they begin and continue their work. Step 9 provides tools for assessing the impact of the PLTs and gathering data for decision-making. Step 10 provides facilitators with additional tips and ideas for successfully supporting the Professional Learning Team process. While most schools generally follow this sequence of steps when implementing learning teams, the sequence may vary, depending on what faculties already know about collaborative work.

The Professional Learning Team facilitator may be a principal, a lead teacher, or another school staff member. Each step begins with background information for the facilitator. This is followed by a guide that describes the tools for that step and suggests ways to use them. Adjust these ideas to best facilitate the process for the teachers you work with. Sometimes the best use of a tool may be to stimulate your thinking or provide you with a better plan.

Some tools may suit your purposes better than others. Mix and match tools from different steps to best suit your requirements and modify them as needed. These tools may be copied and used in workshops and learning team settings.

As you read this book you may notice an occasional overlap of information in different tools. That's planned. These tools are designed for different parts of the process, and the information may bear repeating.

Notice that each step begins with a brief glimpse into a journal kept during the first year I worked to establish Professional Learning Teams. You can access the entire text of my action research diary on MiddleWeb at [www.middleweb.com/mw/images/jollydiary.pdf](http://www.middleweb.com/mw/images/jollydiary.pdf).

SERVE has created an area in the Education Leadership section of its website to expand the resources provided in this book. Visit the “Support for Professional Learning Teams” web page for up-to-date information, web links, and other materials. [[www.serve.org/EdQuality/ProfLearnCom/Tools.php](http://www.serve.org/EdQuality/ProfLearnCom/Tools.php)]

## A Note to the Facilitator

The learning team process you facilitate may involve your entire faculty or may engage a few groups within your faculty who create teams around topics of interest, subject areas, grade levels, or even across school boundaries. In deciding which type of approach to use, consider this recommendation by Dr. Shirley Hord, Scholar Emerita with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. Dr. Hord studies the change process in schools and colleges, as well as leadership factors required to initiate and manage change. In a letter to the author, she recently commented:

*I must admit that I am prejudiced to the whole school concept of a learning community of professionals, rather than a team here and a team there, perhaps working on different aspects of student work. Therefore, I like the idea of small teams all working toward the same overall school goal, for this gives force and significance to the effort and means everyone is heading in the same direction, albeit in somewhat different ways dependent upon their team's students' needs. When the school is consistent across its teams' goals, then there is consistency for students when they move from one grade to the next.*

Whether you involve your entire faculty or groups within the faculty, before you begin implementing Professional Learning Teams, decide on two vital issues:

1. How are you going to provide feedback and support to these teams?
2. How are you going to evaluate their progress and effectiveness?

The ongoing success of this adventure in instructional change will revolve around the quality of follow-up and support you provide. In her book, *Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement* (1997), Hord identifies two types of supportive conditions necessary for establishing productive learning communities: physical conditions and people capacities.

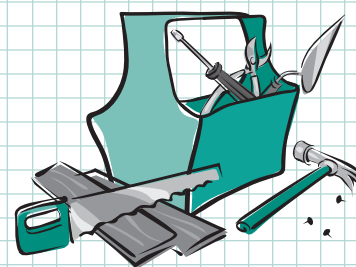
Physical conditions include resources and schedules that reduce isolation, provide time for collaboration, and provide effective communication. People capacities include willingness to learn new knowledge and skills, develop respect and trust, and work together to improve. Throughout this guidebook, you will find tools that can help you with these tasks.

A second essential factor to the success of Professional Learning Teams is careful, upfront attention to how you will determine if this collaborative process is working. How will you know if PLTs are making a difference for teachers, students, and instructional effectiveness? According to Killion, in *Assessing Impact: Evaluating Staff Development* (2002), evaluations are often an afterthought and should be planned at the beginning of a program or initiative. Ongoing assessment of how the Professional Learning Team process is working is crucial to making needed changes and adjustments along the way. Some assessment tools are included throughout this guidebook, and Step 9 is devoted entirely to tools for gauging team progress.

Before you begin, read this guidebook and select tools that are most appropriate for your situation. You can find additional tools on the Professional Learning Team support website ([www.serve.org/EdQuality/ProfLearnCom/Tools.php](http://www.serve.org/EdQuality/ProfLearnCom/Tools.php)), and you may also find effective tools from another source. May you enjoy this adventure and find it rewarding!

# Prepare to Do the Work

<b>Step 1: Build the Foundation</b> .....	<b>1-1</b>
<b>Step 2: Preview the Process</b> .....	<b>2-1</b>
<b>Step 3: Organize the Teams</b> .....	<b>3-1</b>





# Step 1: Build the Foundation

**Entry 2:** For weeks I've been reading all sorts of research on professional development models. Not exactly fast-paced reading. I'm looking for research rooted in something more substantive than traditional "hit-and-run" workshops. This professional development process needs to focus directly on instruction and student learning. It needs to take place at the school site. A gnawing sense of urgency drives me to get a better handle on exactly what this particular process will look like—fast! The only thing I feel certain about at this point is that this process needs to result in teachers becoming a highly professional community of learners.

—Anne Jolly: *An Action Research Diary*

## Background

Congratulations on being on the cutting edge of one of the most important change processes taking place in schools today. As a facilitator, you may already understand the potential of learning teams and be eager for action. Along with your personal enthusiasm, however, the success of this collaborative process ultimately depends on the commitment of all educators involved.




Ideally, the teachers in your school will buy into the concept of focused, collaborative team work. Teachers are often willing—even eager—to try new ideas and approaches to instruction. However, the day-to-day routines of the school and escalating job demands often make the task of taking on new initiatives seem overwhelming. How will teachers feel about another meeting during the week? What might motivate teachers in your school to buy into Professional Learning Teams?

Teachers may buy into the idea of working in learning teams for some of the following reasons:

**Relevance and value:** Teachers will likely support Professional Learning Teams if they see that the work they do in these teams has value for themselves and for their students. Once involved, teachers need to find that their efforts produce effective instructional practices they can use daily in their classrooms. When teachers recognize that students are more successful because of the knowledge and expertise that teachers gain through Professional Learning Team work, they are likely to become active, faithful participants.



### This section will help the facilitator:

-  Provide teachers with a research-based rationale for working together in teams on instruction.
-  Help teachers identify benefits of collaboration for themselves and their colleagues.
-  Build teacher enthusiasm for Professional Learning Team participation.

**Collegial support:** No one goes into teaching to become a millionaire. Most people who enter the teaching profession have a genuine desire to make a difference for students. All too often, teachers' working environments rob them of much needed energy and passion for their chosen profession. Learning teams can provide teachers with collegial support, build skills and confidence, and boost morale.

**A sense of urgency:** A strong motivator in jumpstarting school change, including implementing a learning team process, is a sense of urgency. Many schools currently face serious state sanctions if student achievement fails to improve. The threat of these sanctions creates a culture of urgency. New teacher quality requirements along with national legislation requiring that increasing percentages of teachers receive professional development add yet other pressures. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future warns of another critical urgency:

*There has been no previous time in history when the success, indeed the survival of nations and people, has been so tied to their ability to learn. Today's society has little room for those who cannot read, write, and compute proficiently; find and use resources; frame and solve problems; and continually learn new technologies, skills, and occupations. Every school must be organized to support powerful teaching and learning....America's future depends now, as never before, on our ability to teach.*

—*What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future*, 1996, p. 3

This warning provides two sobering reminders for most teachers: (a) accomplished teaching may well be the deciding factor in whether students succeed in our society, and (b) teachers must continually stay abreast of current developments in their fields and find new and effective ways of helping students learn. They must engage all students in academic work that supports high achievement and help all students master challenging curricula. Because they desire to see students succeed, many teachers may welcome an opportunity to work collaboratively with colleagues as a way of adding to their teaching skills.

**A method of mentoring:** Teachers may also become enthusiastic about this learning team process as a way to induct and mentor new teachers. Regularly working with experienced teachers and building habits of continual learning are good ways to help new



teachers jump-start a successful career. Experienced teachers can likewise benefit from the up-to-date information and ideas these beginning teachers acquired through their recent college experiences. On successful learning teams, teachers play the roles of both mentor and learner.

**Implementing schoolwide initiatives:** Teachers may also see value in the Professional Learning Team process as a disciplined, systematic method for successfully implementing a new schoolwide initiative, such as teaching reading in all content areas or examining student work to drive instruction.

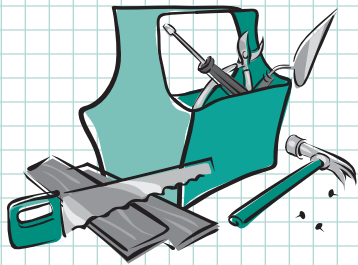
These types of needs provide opportunities to generate interest in learning teams as a way for teachers to work together, learn, and engage in planned, focused, systematic collaboration. The success of even a single learning team, when properly shared and showcased, can trigger a domino effect as more and more teachers grasp “what’s in it for me.” In time, that may change to “what’s in it for us, as a school.”

Over the next decade, student achievement will hinge increasingly on teachers becoming continual learners and constantly adapting their knowledge, expertise, and instruction. How can you help teachers recognize and appreciate that working together at their school is a powerful way to accomplish this? The first step involves building a foundation for collaboration by providing teachers with opportunities and information to answer four basic questions:

1. Why do we need to collaborate on instruction?
2. Why should we use a learning team process?
3. How can this make a difference for us?
4. How can this make a difference for our students?

The Step 1 Guide and tools can assist you with this task.

## STEP 1



# Step 1 Facilitation Guide




For Step 1 you will find six tools designed to engage teachers in exploring the purpose of instructional collaboration, the value of learning together, and how this can make a difference for their students. Use these tools to help teachers gain understanding of and enthusiasm for working together in Professional Learning Teams. These tools include checklists, readings, discussion, and role-play. Rather than trying to use all of these tools, select the one or two that are most appropriate for the teachers you are working with.

This guide contains an explanation of each tool and a suggested method of using that tool with groups of teachers. Note that most tools contain one or more questions for reflection. As an option to the suggested procedures, you may give teachers a moment to complete the activity and reflect quietly, and then ask them to discuss their reflections with a partner or a small group.

In selecting tools, consider your audience. What do they already know and believe about collaboration, and how much time, if any, will you need to spend in building a foundation for implementing learning teams? Also consider the size of your audience, the setting, and amount of time available. You can locate Power Point slides for presenting Step 1 information at [www.serve.org/EdQuality/ProfLearnCom/Tools.php](http://www.serve.org/EdQuality/ProfLearnCom/Tools.php). You may also find additional tools and information related to this step at that site.

### **Tool 1.1 What Do I Know? What Do We Know?**

This tool can help participants engage in a brief problem-solving activity that builds knowledge through collaboration. If participating teachers have already selected a focus for their collective efforts through Professional Learning Teams, such as teaching reading comprehension, you may substitute that topic for the “small group instruction” topic suggested on Tool 1.1.

-  Distribute a copy of this tool to each participant. Give participants three to five minutes to individually jot down responses to the two questions on the activity.
-  Ask teachers to work in groups of 3–4 and share their answers. As they share, ask each participant to note additional ideas and information he/she learns.
-  Ask participants what value they see in the group sharing.

Point out that group members gain new information and insight and all participants are now on the same page and have the same information.

- Ask teachers to suggest what value teacher team work might have for a school's instructional program. Explain that increasing teacher knowledge is only one value of working together on instruction and that exciting times are in store for teachers working in Professional Learning Teams.

### Tool 1.2 Think About Your Professional Development.

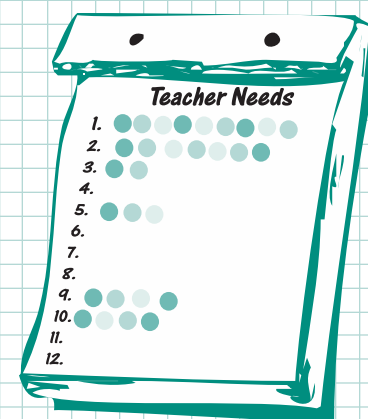
Use this tool to introduce teachers to some standards for quality professional development.

- Suggest that teachers individually think about and write comments for each statement. If you use this tool in a large group, allow time for teachers to briefly “pair and share” and to discuss answers. If participating in a small group (3–4 people), teachers may discuss their responses as a group. Propose that they use a round-robin approach if engaging in a small group discussion so that each participant has an opportunity to share.
- When teachers complete this activity, point out that each of these statements is characteristic of quality professional development. When properly implemented, Professional Learning Teams can address all of these areas.

### Tool 1.3 Look at Teacher Needs.

Use this tool to help teachers think about the personal and professional needs at their school.

- Ask each teacher to place a checkmark beside all sentences that apply.
- When teachers have completed the activity, ask each one to select and share what she considers to be the top three needs.
- Keep track of participants' responses as a way of determining what the faculty sees as its greatest needs. For a quick way of determining which needs the faculty sees as most pertinent, number 1–12 down the left side of a sheet of chart paper. Give each teacher three colorful, adhesive-backed dots. Ask teachers to place one dot beside the number of each of their top three areas of concern.



- After identifying the top areas of concern for the faculty, point out that Professional Learning Teams provide a vehicle to help them meet those needs.

### Tool 1.4 Will Collaboration Work?

This activity provides an entertaining method of involving teachers in thinking about how Professional Learning Teams might work in their schools and about barriers that might need to be addressed. It will provide the facilitator with information on what the faculty sees as important for making Professional Learning Teams work in its school.

- Duplicate and cut apart the cards.
- Provide each team with chart paper and markers.
- Ask teachers to work in small teams. Give each team one of the cards. (Try to distribute the two different cards evenly among teams.)
- After each team finishes brainstorming, ask a team member to share the team's ideas. List the ideas from "Design, Inc." on one piece of chart paper and the ideas from the "Sabotage, Inc." on a different sheet.
- Ask teachers to discuss how their current school culture and organization can facilitate and/or hinder the success of learning teams. If you have a large group, ask teachers to discuss this in their teams and have a spokesperson share with the whole group.
- Suggest that each team make a list of the things needed at the school to successfully implement Professional Learning Teams. Collect these lists.
- Following the work session, compile and distribute a list of teachers' ideas for making collaboration work. Work with appropriate school personnel to address as many of these concerns and suggestions as possible.

### Tool 1.5 Focus Questions.

Use this tool with Tool 1.4 to help teachers answer four basic questions that can help them understand the need for and benefits of professional collaboration.

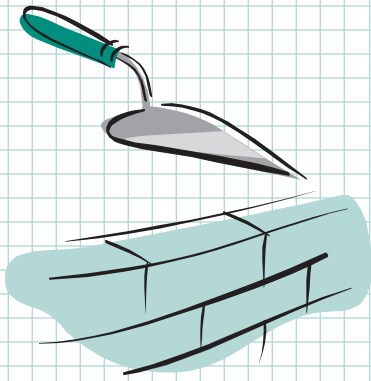
- Give each teacher or group of teachers a copy of the Focus Questions. If you are working with groups of teachers at tables, cut these apart and fold them to make tents to set on the table. (You may prefer to write each question on the bottom half of a 4" x 8" card and fold it to make a tent.) Place a different question at each table.
- Ask teachers to look for answers to these questions as they read the handout, "What Do the Experts Say?" (Tool 1.6).

### Tool 1.6 What Do the Experts Say?

This handout provides teachers with information on the importance of continually improving teaching expertise and the need for ongoing professional development.

- Distribute a copy of this information to each teacher as a method of providing additional information about collaboration.
- Ask teachers to look for information to answer the "Focus Questions" (Tool 1.5) as they read. Suggest they highlight this information.
- If teachers worked on the Focus Questions individually, invite them to hold up one, two, three, or four fingers to indicate what question they would like to answer. Then ask them to locate another person in the room who wants to answer that same question and discuss their thoughts with that person.
- If groups of teachers answered different questions, lead them to share answers for the question on their table with the large group. List their responses on chart paper.
- Ask teachers to turn to a partner and share one reason why he or she believes that working in Professional Learning Teams will be a valuable experience.



**Directions:**

Answer the questions individually. Then form a group of three to four teachers and share answers. Make note of new information you gain.

**Reflect:**

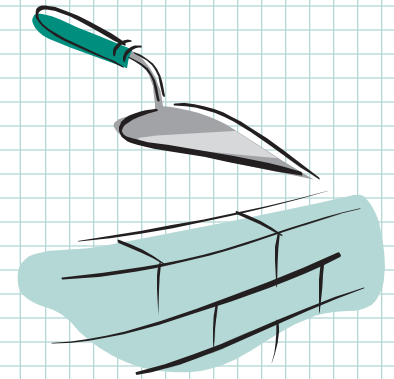
What do you think would be the value of working with a team of professional colleagues to create this professional development program?



**Scenario:** *You are setting up a professional development program for teachers in Bingham Elementary School. The superintendent has promised you the resources you need to engage teachers in effective professional development. The purpose of the professional development will be to help teachers successfully incorporate small group instruction into their classrooms. To help you with your planning, list some answers to the following two questions.*

1. What are some characteristics of quality professional development?
2. What are some resources that can help teachers with small group instruction?

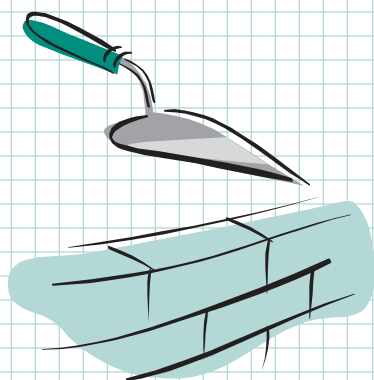
1. Fits naturally with our school system or school goals.
2. Provides a consistent focus and ongoing training and assistance.
3. Creates a collective commitment among teachers to deepen their content knowledge and to learn and use research-based instructional practices.
4. Provides time and opportunities for groups of teachers to meet regularly in order to share, reflect, and work together on instruction.
5. Empowers teachers to make decisions about their own professional learning needs.
6. Is relevant and useful to the situations teachers face each day in the classroom.
7. Provides a way for teachers to learn and grow in a supportive atmosphere.
8. Honors the knowledge and skills of teachers.
9. Provides teachers with a process for addressing student diversity, individualizing instruction, and holding high expectations for all students.
10. Engages teachers in using multiple sources of data to determine student needs.
11. Provides continuing opportunities to grow professionally at the school site.
12. Engages teachers in spending greater amounts of time in professional development.



**Directions:** How do you think the staff development you normally receive measures up? Here are some statements that describe some benefits of quality staff development. Write a brief comment below each item to indicate how your usual professional learning experiences compare.



**Reflect:** Why would this kind of professional development be valuable?



**Directions:** Think about your school as you read the statements at the right. Which of these statements describes the needs of teachers at your school? Discuss the items you check with other participants nearby, and explain your thinking.

**Reflect:** How could regularly working together help us meet these needs?



- 1. We need a way to increase student achievement.
- 2. We need a way to increase our own knowledge and expertise.
- 3. We need to strengthen professional relationships and become less isolated from one another in our work.
- 4. We need a way to systematically examine whether our teaching is making a difference.
- 5. We need support in changing the way we teach over the long-term.
- 6. We need to develop leadership capacity.
- 7. We need an effective way of mentoring new teachers.
- 8. We need a flexible professional development process.
- 9. We need an efficient way to share ideas.
- 10. We need to be regarded as valuable professionals.
- 11. We need a cost-effective way to engage in professional development and continual learning.
- 12. We need a practical way to implement a new initiative.





## Professional Design Team

You are members of Design, Inc., a professional firm that specializes in creating opportunities for professionals to engage in on-the-job collaboration and to increase their skills and productivity.

Your firm has been hired by Innovation High School to help teachers regularly work together in teams to increase their instructional knowledge and teaching skills. How will you do this? What information, opportunities, and working conditions will teachers need in order to do this effectively?

Brainstorm ideas and jot your plans on the chart paper. Your design team has 10 minutes.



## Professional Sabotage Team

You are members of Sabotage, Inc., a firm that specializes in undermining attempts to allow professionals to engage in on-the-job collaboration and to increase their skills and productivity.

Your firm has been hired to tackle a “problem” at Innovation High School. This school plans to create teams of teachers who work together regularly to increase their teaching knowledge and expertise. The school plans to provide teachers with information, support, and working conditions that foster success.

Your job is to sabotage this plan. How will you undermine efforts to create a collaborative culture at the school? Consider addressing attitudes, information, opportunities, and the working environment.

Brainstorm ideas and jot down your plans on the chart paper. Your sabotage team has 10 minutes.



Why do we need to collaborate on instruction?

**Question 1**

**Question 1**

Why do we need to collaborate on instruction?

Why should we use Professional Learning Teams?

**Question 2**

**Question 2**

Why should we use Professional Learning Teams?

How can this make a difference for us?

**Question 3**

**Question 3**

How can this make a difference for us?

How can this make a difference for our students?

**Question 4**

**Question 4**

How can this make a difference for our students?

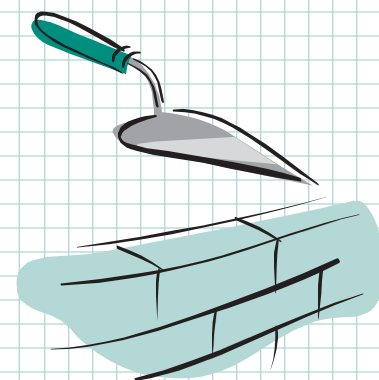
### Teacher expertise matters.

Recent studies verify that competent, committed, qualified teachers are the most important factor in improving student achievement and preparing students to meet higher standards. The 1997 follow-up report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, *Doing What Matters Most: Investing in Quality Teaching*, spotlights teacher knowledge and expertise as the single most important influence on what students learn. According to the report, teachers who know a lot about teaching and learning and work in school environments that allow them to know their students well can overcome many of the conditions outside of school that often impair students' chances of success.

A growing number of studies validate the importance of teacher expertise. An analysis of 900 Texas school districts by Harvard professor Ronald Ferguson points to teacher expertise as a primary influence on student performance. Researcher Linda Darling-Hammond points out that the effect of teacher knowledge and skill in this study was so strong that, "after controlling for socioeconomic status, the large disparities in achievement between black and white students were almost entirely accounted for by differences in the qualifications of their teachers" (2000). Ferguson also presented evidence that "highly qualified teachers have a cumulative effect on students, so that those who score low in the early grades may still achieve at high levels in the upper grades" (1999).

More evidence comes from a 2002 report in which researcher Judith Langer compared student performance in reading, writing, and English in 88 classrooms in California, Florida, New York, and Texas. Unlike the Ferguson study, none of these schools was low achieving. In fact, all of these schools were characterized by active and engaged students and teachers in well-supported classrooms. Yet over a two-year period, Langer found student achievement to be higher among students with more skilled teachers. In fact, students with the most accomplished teachers achieved at an even higher level of literacy than expected.

The results of Wright, Horn, and Sanders' 1997 study indicated that the most important factor affecting student learning is the teacher. In addition, the results show wide variation in effectiveness among teachers. The immediate and clear implication of this finding is that seemingly more can be done to improve education by improving the effectiveness of teachers than by any other single factor (p. 63).



"All teachers will have access to high quality professional development and regular time for collegial work and planning."

— National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. *What Matters Most, Teaching for America's Future*, 1997, p. 63

What, exactly, defines teaching expertise? According to the National Staff Development Council's *Standards for Staff Development, Revised* (2001),

*Successful teachers have a deep understanding of the subjects they teach, use appropriate instructional methods, and apply various classroom assessment strategies. These teachers participate in sustained, intellectually rigorous professional learning regarding the subjects they teach, the strategies they use to teach those subjects, the findings of cognitive scientists regarding human learning, and the means by which they assess student progress in achieving high academic standards. (p. 32)*

The bottom line is that for students to consistently achieve at higher levels, a school must have a faculty of teachers who continually work on and improve their own knowledge and expertise in content, teaching strategies, and assessment. No initiative or program a school adopts will substitute for effective teachers who have the knowledge and skills to help their students master subject matter.

## **Teacher learning opportunities matter.**

How will teachers gain more expertise? In its report *Teacher Quality: A Report on the Preparation and Qualifications of Public School Teachers*, the National Center for Education Statistics points to three criteria as particularly important in bringing about long-term changes in teacher skills and performance:

1. Teachers must spend more time in professional development than they currently spend.
2. Teachers must engage in collaboration and on-the-job learning in a climate that supports professional growth.
3. Teacher learning must be ongoing and must maintain momentum over the long term.

Although most states, districts, and school systems offer substantial amounts of staff development, a recent report by the U.S. Department of Education, *A Talented, Dedicated, and Well-Prepared Teacher in Every Classroom*, points out that teachers still have too few opportunities to improve their knowledge and skills and spend too little time in meaningful professional development. Staff development experiences remain largely short-term and are often unrelated to teachers' current needs. In addition, many staff development offerings

are of low quality. Most professional development is not collaborative in nature. Even though teachers and other experts say that regularly scheduled collaboration among teachers is more effective than most traditional professional development approaches, currently, much that passes for professional development falls far short of providing teachers with the knowledge and support they need to be highly effective.

Clearly, schools need a better way to build teacher expertise. Teacher learning should be ongoing, job-embedded, and continually supported. Schools must provide more frequent opportunities for teachers to gain all the skills and knowledge they need to prepare students for a demanding curriculum and an ever-changing, high-tech society.

## Teacher opportunities to work together matter.

If school leaders expect teachers to gain expertise, they must provide an environment where teachers can continually learn together. The payoff can be enormous. James Stigler, author of *The Teaching Gap*, analyzed why working together to prepare and design lessons achieved such benefits for students and teachers. In researching the Japanese lesson study process, Stigler discovered that by working in groups, teachers were able to describe and analyze classroom teaching and to teach each other about teaching. Working together provided teachers with benchmarks to gauge their own practice and to identify things that could be improved. Collaborating with colleagues on instruction also created a mindset of teaching as a joint responsibility, rather than the responsibility of single individuals.

According to author Richard DuFour, author of *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, actively participating in a learning community can revitalize teachers and teaching because teacher energy stays focused where it should be—on the students. A growing body of literature and experience supports DuFour's assertions. Teachers engage in a powerful form of professional development when they work together in an ongoing, results-focused cycle of inquiry, reflection, dialogue, action, analysis, and adjustment. In their introduction to *Education in a New Era*, Ann Lieberman and Lynn Miller describe the greater sense of responsibility for the success of all students that emerges in collaborative groups. Teachers gain assistance and support from each other by sharing teaching strategies, trying out new ways of teaching, getting feedback, and redesigning

“We need systems that empower staff to define their professional path and grow in ways that are meaningful in their work with students.”

— Wald and Castleberry,  
*Educators as Learners:  
Creating a Professional  
Learning Community in  
Your School*, Association for  
Supervision and Curriculum  
Development, 1998, p.11

“Professional learning communities can increase staff capacity to serve students, but success depends on what the staff do in their collective efforts.”

— Shirley Hord. *Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement*, SEDL, 1997, p. 58

“The best structure for fostering collaboration is the team—the basic building block of the intelligent organization.”

— DuFour and Eaker. *Professional Learning Communities at Work*, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998, p. 118

lessons and methods of instruction. They make the transition from exclusive concerns about “my classroom” and “my students” to a more inclusive attitude about “our school” and “our students.”

Students benefit most when teachers work together. According to Linda Darling-Hammond in *The Work of Restructuring Schools: Building from the Ground Up*, schools where teachers worked collaboratively on teaching and learning showed academic improvement more quickly than schools where this did not happen. These schools provided teachers with opportunities to share what they knew, consult with peers about problems of teaching and learning, and observe peers teaching. Darling-Hammond concludes that teachers must have opportunities to reflect critically on their practice and to create new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learning.

Shirley Hord examined a large body of literature on teacher collaboration for her book, *Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement*. Hord cites Ernest Boyer, who concluded that “the most successful student learning occurs when teachers...find solutions together. In such schools, teachers operate as team members, with shared goals and time routinely designated for professional collaboration. Under these conditions, teachers are more likely to be consistently well informed, professionally renewed, and inspired so that they inspire students” (p. 25).

Many things influence whether teacher teams accomplish something worthwhile for themselves and their students. These include the team’s desire for accomplishment, members’ understandings of the purpose of the collaboration, the clarity of the goals and focus, and the school conditions in which teachers work. Hord concludes that professional collaboration among teams of teachers can increase teacher effectiveness, but success depends on what the teachers do in their collective efforts.

## Doing what matters.

Evidence says that teachers must increase their expertise and that this should be a continual, ongoing process. Teachers must spend more time growing and learning, and much of this activity should occur at the school site. Teachers need to work together in a structured, disciplined manner, and the school culture, including scheduling and staffing, must support this need. In short, schools must be places for teacher learning as well as student learning.

According to DuFour, “The best structure for fostering collaboration is the team—the basic building block of the intelligent organization.” Schools that want to support powerful teaching and learning must find ways to establish and support powerful teacher learning teams. Through the team structure, teachers can build their knowledge and skills in their own classrooms. The learning team process also provides an avenue to support and extend the training teachers gain through workshops and seminars. As teachers work together and challenge one another, they are more likely to sustain their commitment to new innovative and effective instructional practices. Last, but certainly not least, learning teams provide an ideal setting for mentoring and inducting new teachers.

**Reflect:**  
What are the three most powerful points you want to remember from this reading?

