

## “What’s Going On In There?”

A look at what happens to student achievement when teachers are given structured time to talk to one another about what is really happening inside their classrooms.

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What is needed for any group to function effectively? Is it cooperation, tolerance, patience? I believe that what is needed for any group to function effectively, especially a group of educators, is collaboration. The meeting of individuals of varying abilities and experiences who are willing to work and share what they know and believe is what makes students and ultimately a school effective. My research project this year began as I sat in a room filled with educators, administrators and other people concerned about test scores and student achievement. As I listened to the presentation of the day I began to realize that what was really needed to help anyone achieve success in any endeavor was a sense of collaboration between those involved in the task at hand. If this is indeed true, then involving teachers in a collaborative discussion group on a regular basis must surely be a way to enable students to achieve positive results in whatever task they attempt. My task was to involve myself in such a group and to become an active participant so that my students, as well as those in the classrooms of the other group members, would reap the benefits of our collaborative efforts. My question: Just how does regular and structured collaboration between staff members effect student achievement?

**Context and Rationale:**

I am currently a special education teacher in a rural elementary school in Millsboro, DE. I have been teaching in this school for 24 years and know the staff and administration quite well. Most of the staff has been working together for 10 or more years. The principal of the school has been on the job here for more than 20 years. The assistant principal was once a Reading Specialist in this building under the current principal. This dynamic between the principal and assistant provides the staff, as well as the students, with leadership that is well trained and experienced. The school is a

racially mixed school with approximately 30% of the population on free and reduced lunch. For the past three years the school has received a rating of Superior from the State of Delaware for its DSTP (Delaware Student Testing Program) scores. Since the staff was already involved in working as a Professional Learning Community as part of a 2% Staff Development cluster I decided to investigate the effect of this Learning Community on student achievement. I wanted to know if it indeed could help me as a special educator to help my students reach beyond their current levels of achievement.

### **Literature Review:**

What does the educational research say about working collaboratively with others in a school system? There are numerous journal articles and books written on this very subject. Those that were a part of the discussions at my particular school were mainly about what is often referred to as a Professional Learning Community. This is a place where educators come together with a common purpose and focus to develop and maintain an atmosphere that is conducive to learning for all concerned, including the teachers themselves. Learning is the key component in any Professional Learning Community. It is the primary focus of the administration and teachers as well as the students. Southwest Educational Development Laboratory published a journal article entitled Professional Learning Communities: What Are They And Why Are They Important? The focus of the article is that teachers in a school and its administrators can continuously seek and share learning and then act on what they have learned so that their students will be the beneficiaries of this action. Teachers who feel supported in their own ongoing learning and classroom practice are more committed and effective than those who are not receiving that same type of support and affirmation. (Rosenholtz, 1989) It is

this way of thinking that intrigued me and made me want to investigate just how much power these Professional Learning Communities would have over those involved and what would be the end result for our students. According to Darling-Hammond (1996), in schools where there is structured time for planning instruction and for sharing feedback, as well as observing of other teachers, the level of student achievement rises. The research also states that the atmosphere in which teachers and students are placed each day must be one of support and continuous learning. Also essential for success are shared values and vision. Vision is essential because it drives the decisions of the group. (Isaacson & Bamburg, 1992, p.42). The vision is also useful as a guidepost for the decisions that are being made. By sharing and reviewing their teaching practices with each member of the group the team becomes a community and in turn becomes a place for team members to function as teachers and learners. Respect for one another's strengths and trust for sharing weaknesses enables a sense of community to develop that will enable teachers to collaborate freely and "share the wealth".

According to Pat Dukewits and Lewis Gowin in the *Journal of Staff Development*, team members must be empowered to make decisions and also to assume responsibility for their decisions. Team members need to feel they can openly discuss issues facing not only themselves, but also the entire team. This level of trust comes through open communication and a willingness to participate. (JSD, 1996) So, now that the teams are established, what do you need to do to be successful and productive? That was the question I asked myself as I embarked on this journey.

The first step in the process was to make our team feel like a team. How did we accomplish that? First, we decided on a mutually agreed upon time for our weekly meetings. This was difficult due to coverage restraints, but each member of the team saw the need for these meetings to occur. Next, the team needed to establish “Rules of Order”. How would we conduct ourselves during a meeting and what would happen when our conduct wasn’t what was expected of us? Having those issues solved, the final step in the preliminary process was to submit our plan to the administration and have them agree with our decisions. When that happened it was time for the team to start working. Our first task was to develop common assessments so that we could effectively measure growth, not just for one classroom, but also for all students involved. For Kindergarten teachers that meant we would have to share our knowledge about what worked in each individual classroom as well as listen to each other and evaluate our own practices and the practices of those around us. This was not an easy task. As teachers we are used to going into the classroom and closing the door. Now we needed to fling the door wide open and invite others in to discuss and perhaps even change what was happening inside. The comfort level in the room dropped at this time. The fact that there were 2 new Kindergarten teachers on the team was a positive rather than a negative factor. This made it easy for others to share because we were both very eager to learn from others and not necessarily to share our own knowledge. Everyone wanted to join in the camaraderie of our group events.

**Tools:**

So exactly how was I going to know if what I believed was going to happen when the teachers collaborated actually did happen? For this I relied of the book What Works

in Schools and finally I had the answer to how I was going to further evaluate the effect of our learning community on the students' achievement. A survey was found at the back of the book that would evaluate what teachers saw as the strengths and weaknesses of their school. This survey also allowed teachers to comment on how difficult they thought it would be to implement changes within the school. Each grade level cluster was asked by the administration to complete the survey and the results were compiled. The survey results for the Kindergarten group, of which I was a part, were of particular interest to me. Our group saw the school as a whole moving toward the concept of a learning community. We saw the teachers in the building shifting their focus from teaching material to ensuring that all the students in their classes learned the important information presented and if it was not learned, the students had the opportunity and the time to be sure they did indeed master what was needed for them to be successful. Much effort was placed on restructuring groups of students to allow for additional instruction where it was needed. Before and after school tutoring groups were established, as well as additional small groups, which met during special classes. When a student mastered a skill they were dismissed from the small group and returned to their class. Students did not miss instruction in their regular classroom to attend these special sessions. This ensured that all students received the core instruction as well as allowing those who needed additional help to receive it.

Students in grades 2,3,4 and 5 are required in Delaware to take the DSTP (Delaware Student Testing Program) exam in March of each year. This year was no different and each student in those grades listed took part in the test. Results were released in May and our school scored extremely well. 100% of the students in third and

fifth grades met and/or exceeded the standard in reading. Likewise, the results in second and fourth grades reflected similar mastery. Math scores in each grade were between 89-95% of students who met or exceeded the standard. The school improved over last year when nearly 95% of all students met or exceeded the standard in reading. Math scores also improved from the previous year by a substantial amount in each grade. These results were also reflected in the lower grades. While they do not have to participate in the DSTP, they are required to take part in standardized testing. Grade 1 students take the SAT10, while Kindergarten students take the Grade A+ test of mastery. The results of these groups were similar to those of the upper grades. All of the students in the school showed improvement over the previous year. The number of students meeting or exceeding the standards improved in all areas of the school.

These test results further validated my assertion that collaborative efforts of teachers help to enhance student achievement. I believe that these results show that by having teachers work together to share their expertise with each other and also by allowing students to benefit from small group instruction by the specific teachers who were able to enhance their understanding and knowledge, the students' scores increased. Students benefited from having the opportunity to receive specific instruction using the method that was best for them as well as from someone who was an expert in that type of instruction.

**Data Collection:**

The kindergarten students who were the primary focus of my research project were given the Grade A+ test of Mastery in Sept. and again in May. This test measures growth in the area of Language Arts. Our Professional Learning group met each week to

discuss students' progress in the areas of Language Arts and Math. While our primary task was to focus on Math, our group decided to tackle the areas of Language Arts and Math due to their interactive nature in the formative years. The group reviewed results of formative assessments and decisions were made regarding the formation of small instructional groups based on these results. Specific instruction occurred following the assessments that addressed the weaknesses of the individual students. Following the instruction students were retested and were then returned to their classrooms to continue with the instruction by their classroom teacher. Students moved from one group to the next depending on their need at any given time.

**Analysis:**

Results from the testing given in September and May are attached to this paper. Significant gains were achieved in most cases. Students who were identified as those at risk gained significantly as evidenced by the rise in NCE scores from Series 1 to Series2. Teachers were surveyed and asked to determine what they felt were reasons for the gains made by the students who were experiencing difficulties. Teachers felt that the most significant factor affecting achievement was the intervention provided to students due to the discussions at our Professional Learning Community meetings.

**Summary and Conclusion:**

The results of this investigation appear to provide evidence that teachers working together to share their knowledge and expertise will be able to positively affect student achievement, even in students who are experiencing difficulties mastering skills being taught in a conventional setting. By recognizing their own strengths and weaknesses and by being willing to discuss alternatives to the traditional classroom setting, teachers are



able to offer their students additional time and experiences that will assist them in meeting the goals that are needed for success. When teachers are given the time and opportunity to have open discussions about their practice, students are the beneficiaries. Structured collaboration between teachers in a grade level or even among teachers in a school improves student achievement.

**Policy Recommendations:**

So, what does this mean for schools and policies that are currently in place? Teachers need time to teach, but they also need time to learn. They need to learn from their peers and to have time within the school day to process the information they have gleaned from meeting with their peers. Administrators need to recognize that when teachers are given the opportunity to actually sit down and have meaningful discussions about what is truly happening in their classrooms they will not just gripe about specific problems, but will actually look for and find specific solutions to those problems. When a student doesn't master a skill, it is the teacher who feels as if he/she has failed. Teachers want their students to master the skills they are teaching. It is said that teaching is a rewarding profession. Teachers are rewarded when their students are learning and when they themselves are able to learn from their students. Policymakers need to hear what makes a teacher feel rewarded and allow for time within the school day for meaningful collaboration to actually take place. Even more, teachers need the freedom to make decisions about instruction based on these collaborations so that all students are able to receive the type of instruction that best suits their individual needs. Planning time within the school day needs to be mutual so that teachers within a team can meet and discuss these important issues that are facing their students. Also needed are Professional

Days where teachers can meet with others in their building or even perhaps with others from around the district or state to discuss alternative teaching practices. Teachers are lifelong learners and take great pride in being able to make those that they touch learners as well.

## References

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