Teaching is a Team Sport: Collaboration is the Key   by Pete Hall

"It takes a village to raise a child."
-Ancient African proverb

An answer to the school improvement challenge

Educators, put away your umbrellas. Over the past several years, since the dawning of the Accountability Era in education, we've been bombarded with a veritable hailstorm of research about the factors that distinguish successful schools. The torrent intensified as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) sanctions took hold, and what followed was a downpour of short lists from research think-tanks and well-known author/researchers (who hasn't quoted Robert Marzano recently?). We've embraced those lists, posted them on staff-room walls, and used them to create detailed school improvement plans. And since we haven't figured out exactly how to accomplish any of them, the precipitation has continued. At last, a reprieve of sorts is upon us, as the shroud is lifted and we see our path with more clarity.

The short answer to the query, "What is the single strongest determinant in creating an effective school?" is this: TEAMWORK. By another name: collaboration. The curriculum we create, the standards we set, the expectations we set, the assessments we deliver, the data we return, the programs we operate, and the personnel we manage all matter of course, but they are by-products of the real, honest-to-goodness primary factor: teamwork. As a matter of fact, working as a collaborative team a school staff has an exponentially higher rate of success in creating higher-quality curriculum, setting more accurate standards, setting higher expectations, delivering higher-quality assessments, returning higher-yield data, operating more effective programs, and managing better-quality personnel. Teamwork is that ray of sunshine we've all been waiting for.

Collaboration isn't a fad, it's a bona fide strategy for improving schools. But of course, we in education all admit to knowing that. Which brings up a second, perhaps even more important query: "So why aren't we spending more of our energy and time cultivating the team approach to education?" The answer is short and frustrating: We really don't know how do to that, either.

What is collaboration?

Any conversation about collaborative work in education requires an up-front agreement about the definitions of a few important terms. Please indulge me as I clarify an oft-muddled subject and define the following terms:

Collaboration (noun): Work done in partnership with a common goal
Collegiality (noun): The state of friendliness in the workplace
Congeniality (noun): A pleasant or agreeable climate
Cooperation (noun): Work done in a helpful way

Lest we find ourselves hastily inserting these words for each other, let's take a second to differentiate between the big four: *collaboration*, *collegiality*, *congeniality*, and *cooperation*. *Congeniality* really just

reveals the degree to which one enjoys going to work, and that could be for any reason. *Collegiality* speaks more to the relationships among staff members, and could easily be measured by smiles and pleasantries exchanged. *Cooperation* measures whether or not co-workers help each other accomplish tasks, which could include cleaning the staff room. The big difference maker in a school setting, then, is *collaboration* – collaboration addresses the manner in which educators work together towards an agreed-upon goal. The other three terms would certainly add flavor to a collaborative school environment, but they are complements, not prerequisites.

So how does collaboration truly affect a school community?

Effective collaboration does not occur simply in isolation. Rather, it affects a school community in dramatic, positive ways when it becomes routine – embedded in the regular practice of educators and ingrained in their minds. In a way, when it becomes a living philosophy, collaboration can be (and is) the turning point for a school.

When this is the case, a school becomes what is frequently called a *Professional Learning Community (PLC)*. This idea was spawned from the work of Rosenholtz (1989), synthesized by Hord (1997), and subsequently popularized by DuFour (1998), who is now generally recognized as the nation's foremost authority on the PLC concept. Taking cues from such experts, and from many others that have weighed in on the subject in recent years, I have coined yet another definition:

> **Professional Learning Community** (noun): A collection of educators that always strives to perform at its ultimate potential, working together to learn, grow, and improve the professional practice of teaching in order to maximize student learning

As you can tell, the definition is complex and contains a few notable points. First, there is the keyword "always," implying that the *striving* is routine, embedded, and regular. Next are the kickers: the educators are aiming to improve *teaching* so they can reach the ultimate goal of (drumroll, please) increased *student learning.* Student learning is the first and foremost mission of the American educational institution, and it should be the driving force behind the collaborative efforts of its educators. In a true PLC, it is – way beyond the mission statement cut-and-pasted in the school calendar, well past the bravado we like to share at summertime barbecues, and significantly ahead of the current practice in most schools and school systems.

How do we put a PLC into place in our school?

This question is at the heart of school leadership today – how do we corral and massage a school community to truly strive to perform at its ultimate potential? How do we cajole and encourage a teaching staff to work together to learn and grow? How do we insist and support educators as they improve their professional practice with a relentless focus on maximizing student learning? How should we start, since we've already acknowledged that we really don't know how to do all that?

Of the many principals, superintendents, and school leadership teams with whom I have worked over the past few years, a very select few have understood the fundamental answers to those questions. Even

rarer is the leader that has put them into place effectively. The great majority have *heard* of PLCs, perhaps even speaking the language and claiming to have PLCs in place in their schools, but where the knowing-understanding-implementing gaps lie is in the most basic, rudimentary stages of PLC development: A professional learning community is not a *thing*, per se; rather, it is the result of a relentless adherence to a *philosophy*. To help guide us through that thinking, and to lead us to some of the concrete details, I have put together a three-step PLC development guide, which follows:

1. **Commit to the PLC concept**
   The level of commitment necessary to lead a group of educators to embrace a team-first philosophy is staggering – so as the leader, buckle yourself in first. This is not the prototypical *school improvement planning document* type of commitment, where the leadership team decides upon a course of action, types it into the formatted document, sends it to the state department, and calls it a day. Quite the opposite, in fact: this is a true, living, breathing, sweating, crying, and bleeding way of life. The leaders (usually administrators, and the building principals *have to* be on board) must champion the efforts by talking the discourse of "we" and "us" – every time they talk about the school (Johnston, 2004). They must model the collaborative approach by consulting the staff, sharing the decision-making processes, demonstrating a sense of inquiry and curiosity, and designing questions around student achievement and continuous growth. Make no mistake: the school principal and the leadership core are absolutely essential to the viability of PLC development. A dramatic culture change such as this makes for a bumpy ride for all involved; without a concerted, relentless commitment, a PLC has no chance.

2. **Determine the intended outcomes and hold dear to them**
   The finish lines are all-important in a true Professional Learning Community. Though the finish lines constantly change in detail and specifics, the idea and presence of a "prize" aids in the community members keeping their eyes on it (Hall, 2006). The leaders must sit down with the staff and identify the collective mission (why do we exist?), vision (what will we look like when we have reached our potential?), values (what do we believe in as a group?), and goals (what, specifically, do we want to accomplish?) (DuFour, 1998). What is it that the teaching staff holds dear? What is non-negotiable, and what is the ultimate purpose of these children's schooling? What about that school experience falls into the category of what Jim Collins would call the *Hedgehog Concept* (Collins, 2001)? What are the learning objectives that guide the team's work? When the team members are all on the same page, when they agree to the answers to these questions, and when they are stout in their belief that this work can and will be accomplished *together*…only then can they proceed to the collaborative-team work.

3. **Establish formal collaborative teams – and keep score**
   Collaborative teams are quite different than the garden-variety, grade-level meetings that are so commonplace in today's schools (Schmoker, 2006). By definition, a collaborative team is one in which the teammates work together toward an agreed-upon goal. In this case, the goals are somewhat predetermined by student achievement data – the team needs to simply evaluate what the students need to know (essential standards), how they will measure that learning (common assessments), and how they are going to ensure the students learn (instructional methods). Once the all-important finish-line is set, the team can determine which path is most

likely to lead them there – and in a true PLC, the behaviors of collective inquiry (seeking together), action orientation (real-time research), and experimentation (try anything) are encouraged and practiced consciously (DuFour, 1998). The prize (the finish line) is the driving force, and the teammates work together to support one another, to analyze data, to share ideas and best practices, and to evaluate effectiveness of strategies. To help this process along, the building leaders should provide ample opportunities for teams to meet – common prep times, shared release times, covered lunches, alternate staff-meeting times – however it is possible. Also, leaders should model these behaviors and open the dialogue about student achievement and goal-setting by discussing, publicly, each team's goals and results (Hall, 2004). This allows other members of the staff to support and assist other teams' efforts, while simultaneously providing accountability and opportunities for celebration.

It's all about the team

Effective schools share all the characteristics of teams – they are comprised of groups of people with similar skills, complementary roles, and one indispensable common interest: the increased learning of the students under their care. The days of the closed-door school-house are over – schools are too complex, children are too diverse, and the challenges are too daunting to go it alone. Fortunately, the clouds have parted to reveal the opportunities for school improvement through the creation, cultivation, and empowerment of PLCs. As building leaders, it is our challenge, our obligation, and our calling to grab this ray of sunshine and spread it throughout our school communities. If there is one common factor on every list of the characteristics of effective schools that supersedes all the others, it is this: a collaborative professional environment – a Professional Learning Community.

"We rise, we fall; we sink, we swim…together!"
-Principal Joe Clark, *Lean on Me*

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