

## What teachers need and reformers ignore: time to collaborate

By Valerie Strauss, Updated: April 11, 2013

One of the primary things that teachers value but that school reformers have given short shrift is time to collaborate. Here, Stanford University Professor Linda Darling-Hammond, an expert on teaching and teacher education, writes about why this is so important to the profession. Darling-Hammond directs the Stanford University Center for Opportunity Policy in Education and was founding director of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. A former president of the American Educational Research Association, Darling-Hammond focuses her research, teaching, and policy work on issues of school restructuring, teacher quality and educational equity.

By Linda Darling-Hammond

Concern for 21st century learning has driven the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) by more than 40 states. These new standards recognize that the premium in today's world is not merely on students' acquiring information, but on their being able to analyze, synthesize, and apply what they've learned to address new problems, design solutions, collaborate effectively, and communicate persuasively.

Achieving these goals will require a transformation in teaching, learning, and assessment so that all students develop the deeper learning competencies that are necessary for post-secondary success.

Whether that transformation occurs has everything to do with how policymakers and practitioners approach this new reform. Ironically, old style factory-model thinking could undercut richer student learning if we follow traditional patterns of education reform implementation. Like a contractor who is paid a bonus to finish a project on a tight timeline, school systems that cut corners by trying to "automate" teaching decisions through pacing guides, scripted curriculum, or frequent, narrow testing are likely to produce rickety, undeveloped student learning skills.

Efforts to manage instruction through top-down prescriptions rather than the development of deep expertise will not enable the kinds of teaching that are required to help students learn to read, listen, and think critically; conduct research and use evidence; communicate productively orally, in writing, and with technology; and continually improve their own work. Teachers will need to be able to model and demonstrate these skills, identify what their students already know and link it to what they need to learn, build on students' diverse experiences and language backgrounds, and structure rich learning opportunities that combine explicit instruction

with inquiry, feedback, reflection, and revision.

How will teachers transform their practice to meet these expectations? In fields like trauma care and the building trades that have seen sharp gains in quality over the past generation, the emergence of new standards for professional practice coincided with a focus on improving collaborative decision-making and inquiry to solve problems in real time. If we want to see similar gains in education, we must structure for success by understanding that effective collaboration in schools doesn't occur by happenstance—it requires purposeful action.

New research from the [National Center for Literacy Education](#) (NCLE) shows that educators in every subject area and role are eager to work together to deepen literacy learning: Across fields, 77% of educators, principals, and librarians agreed that developing student literacy is one of the most important responsibilities they have. It also showed that educators are committed to common-sense changes to improve teaching and learning practices: they most value time to co-plan with colleagues to create new lessons or instructional strategies and to analyze how their students are developing and what they can do together to advance progress.

On the face of it, these results don't seem surprising—in every field, professionals benefit from connecting with dedicated colleagues to improve practice. What is surprising, even alarming, is how rarely collaborative activities that are essential to improving outcomes are supported in our schools. Here is what NCLE survey respondents reported about support for working together in their schools:

- Only 32% have a chance to frequently co-create or reflect with colleagues about how a lesson has worked.
- Only 21% are given time to frequently examine student work with colleagues.
- Only 14% frequently receive feedback from colleagues.
- And only 10% frequently have the opportunity to observe the teaching practice of a colleague.

Even worse, evidence suggests that time afforded to educators to collaborate and problem-solve is eroding quickly. As recently as 2009, [a MetLife study](#) indicated that 68% of educators had more than an hour per week to engage in structured collaboration with colleagues to improve student learning. By 2012, only 48% had an hour or more per week for this essential work. In what professional field can practice improve if most practitioners don't have even an hour a week to work together collaboratively?

But the NCLE survey data also gives us a foundation to build upon. It found that in schools where educators report that professional collaboration is routinely practiced, trust among all educators is high, and new learning about effective practices is shared much more rapidly.

It makes sense that where principals, school system leaders, and instructional coaches model collaborative decision-making and tackling problems as shared questions to be studied and solved, real change in student learning results.

So we can read the NCLE survey results as both a cautionary tale and a reason for optimism. They suggest that far from resisting change or shirking responsibility, educators are eager to work together to evaluate the quality of teaching at their site and design changes that continuously improve student learning. But, not many schools are yet structured to provide the time and learning opportunities necessary to build this sustainable path to change.

The reform impulse that gave rise to construction of new learning standards and assessments will only work if we invest in the capacity of educators to work together effectively. Where educators are challenged and supported to get off the hamster wheel of “covering” ever more material and work together on important questions driven by what they actually observe, student learning thrives. It’s time to clear away non-essential demands and build capacity in our schools for smarter teaching and learning—educators are ready for it, students deserve it, and our future prosperity and security require it.

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