TEACHER COLLABORATION IN PERSPECTIVE

A DISCUSSION GUIDE
for Teachers and Principals
Teacher Collaboration In Perspective, a joint project of the Spencer Foundation and Public Agenda, is designed to contribute to a better-informed dialogue about how teachers can work together more collaboratively. A Guide to Research provides a summary of key research on teacher collaboration. A set of Critical Questions can help superintendents and school board members begin to understand how teachers currently work and think critically about how to make teachers’ work more collaborative.
Introduction

Collaboration is valued and routine in professions such as health care, scientific research, architecture and the performing arts. But K–12 schools have not historically been expected to embrace or foster collaboration. Teachers often work in isolation, separated from other teachers, making it difficult to benefit from their colleagues’ expertise or to share their expertise with others about how to help more students learn. This is sometimes described as the “egg crate” model of education. Approaches to organizing and improving schools that are focused only on individual teachers do not allow colleagues to help one another solve problems, share critical information about students, develop their abilities or make progress together on achieving schoolwide goals.

A growing body of research shows that getting beyond the egg crate can be helpful: When teachers work more collaboratively, student outcomes can improve, teachers can be more satisfied in their jobs and teacher turnover can decrease. In situations where teachers are already working together regularly, taking stock of how well that collaboration is functioning and how it might be improved or expanded can help to further advance teaching and learning.

The goal of this discussion guide is to help teachers and principals decide whether and how to collaborate and how to do so effectively. The guide can be used in a variety of settings, including in schoolwide or districtwide meetings for professional development, in teacher-in-service trainings, in faculty meetings or in meetings with principals. Using this guide, teachers and principals can make decisions about how to work more collaboratively and at what scale to collaborate.
How to use this discussion guide

This guide is intended for groups of six to 10 people who go through the whole process together. There are five discussion sessions, each of which is designed to last 45 to 75 minutes, depending on what you can arrange in your school. Larger groups will ideally last at least an hour to ensure everyone has adequate time to participate.

The discussions are designed to be used in order. They cover the following:

1. Benefits and challenges of collaboration
2. Goals for collaboration
3. Assets for and constraints on collaboration
4. Some collaborative practices to consider
5. Planning to implement collaboration

These groups are likely to be more productive if, at the beginning of each discussion, one participant volunteers to facilitate the conversation. The facilitator does not need to be an expert on the topic. In fact, the main requirement is that the facilitator should avoid giving his or her own opinions and focus instead on making sure everyone else has a chance to speak.

The facilitator should:

- Resist the urge to speak after each comment or answer every question. Let participants respond directly to one another.
- Once in a while, ask participants to sum up important points. Write important points on a whiteboard or flipchart.
- Not be afraid of silence. People sometimes need time to think before they respond. Try counting silently to 10 before you rephrase the question. This will give people time to collect their thoughts.
- Make sure everyone has a chance to speak; don’t let anyone take over the conversation.
- Keep track of time.

There should also be a notetaker for each discussion. This too can be a role that is alternated among group members.
Setting ground rules for these discussions

It may be helpful to set some ground rules for these discussions. Following are some guidelines that are often used in small-group dialogues:

- Listen with respect.
- It’s okay to disagree, but do so on the level of ideas. Don’t get personal.
- Look at all sides of the issues.
- Make sure everyone has a chance to speak.
- Keep people’s personal stories and statements confidential.
- Have fun!

Do you want to modify or delete any of these guidelines? Are there others you want to add? It is a good idea to review these guidelines quickly at the beginning of each session.

Key questions to consider before you get started

Working more collaboratively requires support and participation from teachers and from school and district administrators. To prepare for these discussions, teachers and principals should consider the following questions to ensure that the discussions are as productive as possible:

- Are school and district leaders open to greater teacher collaboration and willing to engage with teachers about how their work is organized?
- Has your school or district faced budget cuts that constrain administrators’ capacity to set aside time and resources for teachers to work collaboratively?
- Who should be a part of this discussion about working more collaboratively? How do you ensure a diversity of perspectives?
- How can you invite people into this discussion so they will be excited about participating and feel confident that their views will be heard, rather than see it as a burden?

What can research tell us about the role of leadership in fostering collaboration?

Among the conclusions of a survey of nearly 6,000 Chicago elementary school teachers is that principals can nurture “a normative climate in which innovative professional activity is supported and encouraged.” They found that schools where teachers said their principals exhibited inclusive leadership and encouraged innovation and risk taking were more likely to have a “professional community” among teachers. And according to researcher David Piercey’s perspective on what the literature has shown, principals and other school leaders can model collaboration in ways that teachers can adopt.

Does this match with your experiences of your principal or other school leadership?
DISCUSSIONS
DISCUSSION 1

Benefits and challenges of collaboration

Before setting goals about the intended outcomes of working more collaboratively, and before considering the assets you bring and constraints you face in fostering collaboration, you need to ask yourselves the most important question: Why collaborate? How might collaboration be helpful to teachers? How might it improve student learning? What are the downsides or pitfalls of working more collaboratively?

A) What are your successes and challenges as teachers?

• Why did you decide to become an educator?

• What do you enjoy most about your job? What do you enjoy the least?

• Where do you feel you’ve succeeded? What are the greatest challenges you face?

• Have there been times when you feel that you’ve successfully collaborated with other teachers? What made that collaboration effective?

• Have there been times when you feel that you’ve collaborated with other teachers but it was not successful? What made that collaboration less than effective?

What can research tell us about how teachers view collaboration?

Some teachers value the moral support that comes from collaboration. They in several studies say it is helpful knowing that they are not alone in facing challenges or uncertainty. They have described the frequent contact with their colleagues in collaboration as an accountability mechanism similar to having a workout buddy. In a study of teachers at four Australian schools that were trying to implement more collaborative practices, some teachers felt collaboration improved morale, made the school environment warmer and reduced isolation and workload. However, this same study found that other teachers were negative about the collaborative practices, citing larger workloads, pressure to conform and a feeling of lost autonomy.

Does this match your experiences working together with other teachers?
B) What are your hopes and worries about a more collaborative workplace?

Collaboration can take a variety of forms, including mentoring, teacher teams, professional communities or professional learning communities, and lesson study. Teachers can collaborate with one another schoolwide, by grade level, within a department or in smaller groups and pairs. Later discussions in this guide will explore some of these practices in more detail. But first, it may be helpful to consider how you work together currently and how working more collaboratively might be helpful and challenging.

- How are you already working together? What is it helping you achieve? What challenges is it creating?
  - Are people meeting regularly and frequently to work together?
  - Do you currently have a clear and worthwhile purpose when you work together?
  - Does working collaboratively help teachers improve their own instruction and the success of students and the school? Why or why not?
  - Do principals and administrators view teachers as partners in shaping the goals and practices of the school?

- What are the potential benefits and challenges of working more collaboratively?
  - What can you learn from one another or share with one another that can help you meet your goals for yourselves professionally, for students and for the school?
  - How might collaboration help or hinder your ability to learn new skills and approaches to teaching and learning?
  - How might collaboration help or hinder your ability to deal with the stresses and challenges of your job?
  - Do you see collaboration as something that might be helpful with day-to-day tasks? Do you see it as something that could transform the way your whole school operates? Or do you see it as something in between?

ENDNOTES

2 Ibid., 768.
Many researchers have concluded that teacher collaboration tends to be more successful when teachers have goals and shared values. Shared goals may both encourage and result from collaboration. This discussion outlines four potential goals of working more collaboratively. They are not mutually exclusive. You might adopt one of them or several of them, or you may want to develop your own goals.

**GOAL 1: To create and maintain a positive climate for teachers and students.**

Teachers should work together to improve the school’s climate. Schools can be more successful when teachers and students enjoy being at school and interacting with one another. When teachers work at schools with a positive climate, they are better able to reach their full potential in the classroom, which can lead to improved outcomes for students.

**Consider:**

- Working with other teachers to identify what a positive school climate would be like, and creating a vision that outlines what teachers can do to improve the climate.
- Setting time to engage administrators in creating a vision for school climate and in determining what they can do to improve the climate.
- Understanding how students experience the school’s climate—for example, by enlisting student leaders for feedback and assistance.
- Checking in regularly with teachers, administrators and students to talk about the climate of schools and how to improve it.

**DISCUSSION 2**

Goals for collaboration

What can research tell us about the importance of shared goals when teachers collaborate?

A comprehensive 2015 review of the literature on teacher collaboration found that shared goals, among other conditions, is mentioned across many studies as an important factor in facilitating teacher collaboration, while a lack of clarity around goals is an oft-cited factor hindering collaboration. The process of collaborating can also lead teachers to develop shared goals.

**What goals would you like to achieve together with other teachers?**
GOAL 2: To improve student learning.

Helping students learn is the main goal of teaching. Therefore, teachers should work more collaboratively to help all students learn. For instance, teachers can collaborate to develop formative assessments of students, can discuss their findings of those assessments and can work together to understand the implications of those findings for their students. Teachers can work together to identify how students are learning, where students need help and how to adjust their instruction. In addition, by working together to better understand students’ social and emotional lives, teachers can develop and share knowledge that can help more students succeed. Where effective approaches to specific challenges don’t currently exist, teachers working together can engage in joint problem solving to come up with innovative solutions, try them out and see what they can learn.

Consider:

• Working together to establish milestones for student development, using metrics such as reading or math proficiencies or other metrics appropriate for your school.

• Working together to establish milestones for students’ social and emotional competencies.

• Expanding teachers’ data literacy to understand what kinds of information about students would be helpful, how to gather that information, how to interpret it and how to use it to help improve learning.

• Exploring ways to help students assess their own progress, and providing students with feedback to help them stay on track with their goals.

• Collaboratively designing opportunities for students’ own collaboration with their peers across classrooms and grades.

What can research tell us about collaboration and student achievement?

Analysis of nearly a decade of data from schools in an urban North Carolina district, one of the largest in the country, showed that teachers achieved greater increases in their students’ standardized test scores in schools with supportive professional environments—especially those with more peer collaboration and a positive school culture—than did teachers in schools with less supportive professional environments. Other research analyzing two years of data on more than 9,000 teachers in 336 Miami-Dade County public schools showed that schools with better-quality collaboration—meaning where teachers reported their collaboration in instructional teams was both “extensive” and “helpful”—had higher student achievement gains in math and reading. This held true even controlling for other characteristics of those schools’ students and teachers, meaning the researchers could be more confident that the difference was related to the quality of collaboration at the school and not to differences in the students and teachers themselves.

Are you surprised by these findings about teacher collaboration and student achievement? Why or why not?
GOAL 3: To help teachers improve their skills and capacities.

Teachers should work together to help one another develop as teachers. Sharing instructional practices, content knowledge and other techniques can help all teachers become more effective—especially new teachers.

Consider:

• Exploring with teachers and teacher leaders what kinds of professional learning and ongoing support teachers need, including teachers at different stages of their careers.

• Considering replacing professional development that is not ongoing with frequent and regular opportunities to support teachers’ professional learning.

• Establishing mentoring programs, such as pairing effective veteran teachers with new teachers or taking fuller advantage of other mentoring arrangements.

• Establishing teacher teams, within grade levels, subject areas or other configurations, to engage in joint problem solving around teaching and learning challenges, to try out possible solutions and to share what team members learn.

• Creating an induction program for teachers new to the school that is comprehensive and lasts throughout the school year.

GOAL 4: To address diversity, inclusion and any disparities associated with race in the school.

Public schools and public school teachers educate an increasingly diverse student body. Teachers should therefore work together to address diversity, inclusion and any disparities associated with race—such as disparities in student achievement or social inclusion. Students (and teachers) are members of multiple groups. They are shaped by and help to shape the communities to which they belong. Understanding the challenges faced by traditionally marginalized students can help schools respond to the risks students face in and out of school. Understanding the resources and networks available to students can help teachers and students alike to recognize and cultivate students’ resilience. Helping all students learn can also help more students succeed in our increasingly multicultural world.
Consider:

- Finding out whether there are disparities in students’ academic outcomes associated with race or other categories and discussing how to address them.
- Exploring with students and observing with other teachers whether and how race and other forms of diversity may map onto social divisions within the school.
- Developing programs to engage students and teachers in conversations about race and diversity.
- Helping teachers get the training and support they need to engage in or lead these conversations.

What can research tell us about how schools have addressed disparities associated with race?

At “Railside,”* an urban California high school serving a diverse, low-income student body with many English-language learners, quality collaboration among the teachers in the math department led to the development, implementation and refinement of a groundbreaking equity-focused pedagogy that transformed student learning and achievement and received national renown. But a change in school leadership that occurred simultaneously with new district policies and budget cuts upended decades of work that had gone into building collaboration and creating the equity pedagogy.14

*Railside is a pseudonym given to the high school by the authors.

Have you tried to discuss race, diversity or inclusion in your classrooms or with your colleagues? What did you learn from those conversations?

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE GOALS:

- Are there any other goals that you ought to consider in addition to these?
- Which seem most promising for you to work on collaboratively?
- How would working more collaboratively help achieve one or more of these goals?
- How will you know if collaborative practices are helping to meet the goals that you establish?
ENDNOTES


12 Ibid., 501.


DISCUSSION 3

Assets for and constraints on collaboration

Every school and district has strengths and weaknesses when it comes to supporting teacher collaboration. This discussion can help you think through these issues for your school or district.

A) What is the climate in your school?

• What is your current school climate? What is the current climate in the district?
• How well do teachers get along with one another?
• How safe do teachers feel in speaking up when they have a problem or idea?
• How well does the school deal with differences of race, gender, language or culture? Do teachers of all backgrounds and identities feel comfortable and included?
• How receptive are principals to teachers’ feedback and criticism? How receptive are teachers to principals’ feedback and criticism?

What can research tell us about the resources teachers need to collaborate?

Dedicated time for teachers to work together is crucial to collaboration. Certain simple forms of collaboration such as sharing lesson plans may happen without physical contact and may take very little time. But time and spaces are required for sustained, ongoing discussions of lesson designs, student learning processes, subject-area issues, multidisciplinary connections and pedagogical challenges. Unfortunately, time for collaboration is not always reflected in teachers’ formal schedules or paid time.

Does your school’s schedule create sufficient time for teachers to work together?
B) What do you need to make collaboration work?

- What are your school’s greatest assets for working more collaboratively? Assets can include physical attributes such as meeting spaces and communication technology, resources such as professional development time, or the human capital of your teacher colleagues or administrators such as strong facilitation and implementation skills.

- What are your school’s greatest obstacles when it comes to working more collaboratively? How can you address these challenges in a positive way?

- Are there financial costs that will need to be covered if teachers work more collaboratively? How can they be covered?

- Is there sufficient time for teachers to work together? Does time need to be set aside, or might collaboration become a built-in part of already scheduled activities?

- Who in your school might be a resource you can tap to assist with making the most of working collaboratively?

- Who is left out, talked over or otherwise marginalized when teachers collaborate? Do teachers differ in how they adapt to and operate in collaborative settings by years of experience, gender, race, sexual orientation or other variables?

- In unionized districts, how can relationships between teachers’ unions and administrators help or hinder efforts to make teachers’ work more collaborative?

- How will parents respond to efforts to foster a more collaborative teacher workplace? How should they be engaged, and who should engage them?

ENDNOTES


DISCUSSION 4

Some collaborative practices to consider

There are many ways for teachers to work collaboratively and many ways for schools to become more collaborative workplaces. In a school where teachers have had little experience of collaboration, a small group of faculty could start by setting up regular, informal conversations about lesson plans. In a school or district with an ambitious agenda to foster collaboration, administrators could reorganize schedules, reallocate staffing and devote other resources to supporting more effective collaboration. Educators could introduce elements of collaboration into their existing approaches to work, or they could embrace collaboration so that it transforms everything that teachers, principals and students do.

This discussion describes a number of collaborative practices. You don’t need to choose only one. These practices are often combined and used together.

A) Mentoring

In mentoring relationships, a teacher may work with another teacher whom he or she views as more experienced or knowledgeable in a particular area. Mentors may observe their mentees teaching and provide constructive feedback or invite the mentee to watch them teach to learn by example. Mentors and mentees could also co-plan lessons or units of study by designing with particular student learning needs in mind, such as those of English-language learners. Some schools make explicit roles for mentors among the ranks of their teachers, particularly for helping beginning teachers, guiding teachers who are new to the particular schools—possibly as part of an induction process—or assisting teachers who are adapting to new grade levels, content areas, pedagogies or instructional goals. Some schools make mentoring a routine practice for all teachers to help them develop skills and knowledge. Principals can play important roles in mentoring approaches and in creating an atmosphere where all teachers, new and continuing, are able to work with their colleagues.

Consider:

- Mentoring can be helpful for teachers who want to collaborate on a smaller scale.
- Mentoring can be challenging if the faculty consists mostly of beginning teachers.
- Mentoring requires teacher trust and administrator buy-in to be effective.
- Mentoring need not be reserved only for teachers construed to be in need of help. It can be part of a routine, continuous improvement process for all teachers.

Evidence for the effectiveness of mentoring at improving student outcomes is mixed: One large experimental study found a mentoring program improved student outcomes under certain conditions, but another large experimental study found that two comprehensive mentoring programs did not improve student outcomes.17
Questions to ask:

- Who at your school is already acting in a mentor role? What successes and challenges have you observed in mentoring relationships?
- Can schedules be arranged so that teachers have common, regular time and space for mentoring during the school day?
- Does the mentoring at your school take place as part of an induction process? If so, is it mainly at the beginning of the year or does it extend throughout the school year, or even beyond an initial year?

B) Teacher teams

The term “teams” is often used in K–12 education to refer to entire staffs of teachers, within grade levels or departments, for example. This term does not automatically imply that any collaborative activities take place. But if existing teams are leveraged, they can be obvious places to spur more collaborative work. Collaborative teacher teams can be organized and structured in a variety of ways, for a variety of purposes. Collaborative teams can be organized to bring together teachers within a department or grade level, or they can focus on specific issues such as improving reading across the curriculum.

Consider:

- Teamwork can require buy-in and support from other teachers, staff and principals whose work may be affected by the team’s work or may need to change in order for the team to reach its goals.
- Teams can develop and use a combination of formal and informal assessment techniques to understand student learning and identify areas for growth.
• Effective teamwork may require teachers to build their data literacy to understand how and how well students are learning.

• Teams are made up of people with a variety of backgrounds and perspectives that affect how and how well they work together. Teams have purposes that can shift and processes that can improve over time.

• Alongside this task-oriented work, teams also have to manage the social and emotional needs of their members to ensure feelings of belonging and value to the group.

Questions to ask:

• Some teams are more effective than others. How can you ensure that teachers use their teamwork time effectively?

• Who will facilitate teams’ work, and how might that role conflict with the facilitators’ other responsibilities?

• Can schedules be arranged so that teachers have common, regular time and space to work together during the school day or week?

C) Professional communities or professional learning communities

Professional communities, or professional learning communities (PLCs), are an approach to school improvement that includes teamwork but extends beyond teams. A professional community is usually understood to comprise a group of people across a school who are engaged in common work; share a set of values, norms and orientations toward teaching, students and schooling; and operate collaboratively with structures that foster interdependence. This approach to school improvement is undergirded by the ideas that teachers sharing knowledge and learning actively with one another will improve their instruction and their students’ achievements and that structure and support are required for these exchanges to occur at the frequency and depth that are necessary for them to be beneficial.

Consider:

• Professional communities can be implemented in different ways—some are more robust and effective than others.

• Creating professional communities requires buy-in and support from teachers, principals and other staff in the school.

• In professional communities, teachers take collective responsibility for improving the school as a whole, which means teachers focus not just on their own classrooms, but on their colleagues’ classrooms as well. This way of working could seem like a challenge to some teachers’ notions of autonomy.

• Teacher leadership and teacher agency can help these communities succeed.

• PLCs can be polarizing: A survey found substantial dissatisfaction among teachers with PLCs as a form of professional development in their schools but substantial support among educational leaders for devoting more resources to PLCs.
What can research tell us about professional communities?

Based on their research on school organizational features and student achievement outcomes in Chicago public elementary schools, researchers from the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research led by Anthony Bryk acknowledged that work in a professional community represents a very new arrangement for teachers, one dependent on collaboration. It makes their work public to their colleagues, requires critical questions and relies on a shared commitment to student improvement.21 Yet in their study, schools characterized by a strong professional community were about four times as likely to see a substantial improvement in students’ reading and math scores than schools that had a weak professional community.22

Do you think your school could build a professional community? Why or why not?

Questions to ask:

- How will professional communities maintain respect for diverse points of view and protect teachers’ autonomy while fostering collaboration that supports learning for all students?
- Can schedules be arranged so that teachers have common, regular time to work together during the school day or week?
- How will teachers work together effectively in a professional community?
- Is there sufficient support from the principal or school leadership to help ensure that the professional community functions effectively?
D) Lesson study

In “lesson study,” teachers work together to design, teach, observe, analyze and revise lessons. First developed in Japan, lesson study has been called “classroom-based collaborative research” that is designed and undertaken by teachers. The idea is for teachers to focus on a lesson—studying it closely and collaboratively, deliberating and sharing ideas about it. The process typically works as follows: A group of teachers reviews a curriculum and works together to identify goals for student learning and to co-design a lesson. They conduct a live classroom lesson led by one teacher and observed by the rest, who collect data and make observations on teaching and learning during the lesson. Teachers then meet to discuss and reflect on the data to evaluate the lesson on whether and how it achieved the student learning goals. In some cases, the group of teachers will then redesign the lesson and repeat the process. This process can be reiterated multiple times with the same lesson, and then it can be conducted with a new lesson. The practice is designed to lead to slow but steady change.

Consider:

- Implementing lesson study requires frequent learning opportunities for teachers to understand and become familiar with this practice and the theory behind it.

- Japan saw sustained high levels of student achievement during the 20th century, and the institutionalized use of lesson study in Japanese schools suggests a relationship between lesson study and improvements in student achievement.

- Lesson study has not been widely adopted in schools in the United States.

Questions to ask:

- Are there teacher leaders who can facilitate lesson study, or do you need to seek out outside help?

QUESTIONS ABOUT THESE COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES:

- Are there any other practices that you ought to consider in addition to these four?
- Which seems most promising as a way to work more collaboratively? Why?
ENDNOTES


19 Ibid., 357–80.


21 Anthony S. Bryk, Penny Bender Sebring, Elaine Allensworth, Stuart Luppescu et al., Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 56.

22 Ibid., 117.

DISCUSSION 5
Planning to implement collaboration

In this final discussion you will review the goals you have defined (see Discussion 2: Goals for collaboration) and the assets you have mapped (see Discussion 3: Assets for and constraints on collaboration). This discussion will help you begin to design a plan for moving forward.

A) Summarizing your discussions thus far

• What have been the most important insights or conclusions from these discussions?
• Were you mostly on the same page, or were there significant differences in opinion? What were your important areas of agreement and disagreement?
• What concerns need more attention?
• What questions remain unanswered, and what other information do you need?
• What constraints and pitfalls do you need to keep in mind as you start to create a more collaborative workplace?

B) Moving forward with collaboration

• Which of the goals you explored in Discussion 2 seem most compelling and important for your school?
• Which of the assets or resources you identified in Discussion 3 are available in your school? Which do you need to access, create or obtain?
• Which of the constraints you identified in Discussion 3 are most daunting? Which will you address first?
• Which of the collaborative practices described in Discussion 4, if any, would be useful in your school?
• How can you ensure that collaborative practices work for teachers of all backgrounds?
• How can you ensure that collaborative practices work for teachers with different teaching assignments, such as different grade levels, subject areas or groups of children?
• Who else needs to be brought into this conversation—particularly at the district level—to help you move forward?
• How will you measure your progress? How will you celebrate success and recover from setbacks?
• How will efforts to help teachers work more collaboratively be sustained?
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