



TEACHING TOLERANCE

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Providing job-embedded, collaborative teacher growth and learning is not a new idea, but making that happen effectively in your school can be a mind-boggling venture. One successful approach involves using professional learning teams in which small groups of teachers meet regularly during the school day to focus on student needs and solutions.

Acceptance is a big deal to students. When they feel valued and accepted, students are more likely to learn, be more confident, and make more valuable contributions. Resourceful schools know this and work to build school cultures that promote the acceptance and learning of all students. In such schools, teachers certainly know a lot about their content areas, but they also have a deep understanding and appreciation of the young people they teach.

Imagine a school where all teachers and staff have the knowledge and skills they need to help students learn in a culture of caring and acceptance, a culture with uniformly high expectations and equitable access to high-quality learning opportunities. Such an effort on a faculty-wide scale could have collective impact that prepares students not only to learn at higher levels but also to assume common obligations and responsibilities. In order to create such a culture at your school, two things must happen.

1. Teachers must regularly work together to learn new ideas, plan, try out new strategies, get feedback, and reflect with other teachers to learn from experience and refine their approaches.
2. School schedules and staffing must create regular blocks of time during the school day for teachers to collaboratively address issues related to teaching diverse students and develop a shared feeling of responsibility for all students.

Providing job-embedded, collaborative teacher growth and learning is not a new idea, but making that happen effectively in your school can be a mind-boggling venture. One successful approach involves using professional learning teams in which small groups of teachers meet regularly during the school day to focus on student needs and solutions.

To assess your school's readiness for implementing this initiative, consider these questions:

- What knowledge and skill about teaming do your teachers need?
- Do the policies and procedures in place at your school facilitate teaming?

- How do the teachers feel about learning teams at this point?
- What team-oriented rewards and incentives are in place?
- Will teachers buy in to the concept of collaborative teamwork focused on meeting the needs of diverse students?

Once you have this information you are ready to help teachers understand and implement productive teams.

Teachers are often willing – even eager – to try new ideas and approaches to teach and solve problems. However, the day-to-day routines of the school and escalating job demands often make the task of taking on new initiatives seem overwhelming. Below are 10 steps that can help you roll out learning teams more smoothly in your schools.

Additional help for implementing these steps can be found in the Team to Teach book at the National Staff Development Council website at www.nsdcc.org [1].

1. Explain the initiative to the faculty and help them answer them question, "Why should we do this?" Provide teachers with a research-based rationale for working together to address solutions for intolerance and lack of respect among students, teachers, and other members of the school community.
2. Introduce the team process to your faculty. Help teachers identify characteristics of learning teams, understand what these teams are and are not, and how they differ from current teams in which teachers participate.
3. Plan and organize for team work. Address questions such as: Who will be on the teams? (Three to five is the recommended number.) When will teams meet? What resources will teams need?
4. Get teams off to a good start. Lead each group of team members in setting norms that matter to them and in using these to set the stage for productive meetings.
5. Guide team members to select and set team goals. Note that the goal for a learning team focuses on what teachers (rather than students) need to learn and be able to do. What teachers need to learn is driven by student needs and data like text scores and suspension records.
6. Help teams develop a plan. To develop this plan it's better to discuss relevant issues than to use a fill-in-the-blanks form. For example, team members might examine their beliefs and assumptions about teaching diverse students; discuss what their classrooms might look like if they were doing this well; identify their current practices in dealing with diversity; and specify what steps they will take to increase their expertise.
7. Enable teams to conduct successful meetings. Give them guidance, information, and productive feedback. Teams will need to send logs of their meetings to the principal and to other teams to start an online, ongoing conversation about diversity and successful strategies they are discovering. (Rather than asking teams to fill in a form for the log, ask them to simply report big ideas from their discussions, decisions the team makes, and plans for the next meeting.)
8. Maintain team momentum. Provide support and assistance in building trusting behaviors among team members, maintain high visibility for the learning teams, make resources available, and hone your troubleshooting skills. Productive feedback, frequent attention and visibility are major drivers in keeping the initiative moving.
9. Assess team progress. Give team members frequent opportunities to assess how well they are working together as a team and decide where they might make adjustments.

10. Facilitate effectively. Be a continual learner when it comes to locating tips for facilitating good teamwork and providing support and assistance.

As you start the work of establishing learning teams, be flexible and ready to accept detours. Above all, be ready to offer encouragement and support to teachers as they accept the challenges of maximizing learning opportunities for all students, and of increasing their own knowledge and skills to do so.

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[1] <http://www.nsd.org>