



COLLABORATE

TEACHER COLLABORATION CAN
BOOST STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT
SAYS PLC PRACTITIONER TOM MANY



"When teachers are clear about the content of their collaboration, student performance grows."

In October, SCO E hosted the second professional development seminar of its year-long Leadership Series. This session featured Thomas W. Many, Ed.D., superintendent of Kildeer Countryside Community Consolidated School District 96 in Buffalo Grove, Illinois, and co-author of *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*.

Dr. Many shared his experiences leading district-wide professional learning communities (PLCs) in District 96. Through focused implementation of PLCs over the past six years, this district has earned recognition as one of the highest achieving elementary school districts in Illinois. The district's staff attribute much of their success to the power of collaborative teams working together in the interest of student learning.

Why collaborate? Dr. Many began working to implement the professional learning communities concept in 1998. He and colleagues Rebecca Dufour, Richard Dufour, and Robert Eaker believe that when teachers have increased collaboration time to focus on the academic needs of students, achievement rises. Their premise is that the best strategy for helping all students learn at high levels is to develop a staff's capacity to function as a *learning community*—and they have developed strategies and structures to support this idea.

The goal of establishing professional learning communities supports the challenge Mike Schmoker presented to Sonoma County educators in September—to end teacher isolation in order to ensure that all classrooms

implement a guaranteed and viable curriculum. As Dr. Many explained, “a collaboration of teachers, administrators, parents, and students who work together to seek best practices, hone those practices in the classroom, continuously improve processes, and focus on results” can dramatically change student performance levels. To be effective, Many believes that teacher collaborations must have these characteristics:

- Shared mission, vision, values, and goals
- Focused, cooperative teamwork
- Collective inquiry
- Action orientation and experimentation
- Commitment to continuous improvement
- A results orientation

Shifting the focus to learning: At the heart of an effective professional learning community is a shift away from thinking about *teaching* to focus on *learning*. Dr. Many suggests that educators can begin establishing collaborative cultures “by making learning rather than teaching the fundamental purpose of your school.” He cites these four questions as critical ones for teachers and administrators to discuss:

- What knowledge and skills should every student acquire (as a result of this class, course, or grade level)?
- How will we know each student has acquired the essential knowledge and skills?
- How will we respond when some students do not learn?
- How will we respond when some students have clearly achieved the intended outcomes?

Key to answering these questions is alignment of curriculum, says Many. With so many standards to teach, educators need to work together to determine what’s essential for students to learn and to focus the curriculum so that this essential learning occurs.

A process for aligning curriculum across grades called “Keep, Drop, Create” is one Many has seen work for teacher teams. Here, teachers meet at least once per grading period. Using their lesson plan books as a record of what has been taught, the teachers compare one subject at a time and sort topics into three categories—Keep, Drop, Create. Topics that are included in lesson books and aligned to the standards go in the Keep category, while ones that are in the lesson books but *not* aligned to standards are labeled “Drop” and are no longer taught. Topics that are reflected in the standards but missing from the lesson books are listed in the Create category. The result of

this process is to tighten and narrow the curriculum, while creating a common focus for planning, pacing, and coordinating instruction of essential standards.

Use of common assessments: Once a common curriculum is established, Dr. Many suggests that common formative assessments be developed and used. He defines common assessments as “assessments collaboratively designed by a grade level or department and administered to students by each participating teacher periodically throughout the year.” The purpose of common assessments is to identify the instructional needs of students within classrooms and across teams.

Dr. Many clarified the roles of formative and summative assessments. Summative assessments are assessments *of* learning and answer the question, “How much have students learned at this particular point in time?” Formative assessments are assessments *for* learning and answer the question, “How can we use this information to help students learn more?” Formative assessments are typically teacher-created, providing frequent check-ins so that instruction can be tailored to student needs.

“Effective assessment systems couple formative and summative assessments to allow continuous assessment *for* learning, marked with periodic assessments *of* learning,” says Many. Citing Sam Redding’s *The Mega System* (2006), he presented the Assessment Continuum schema pictured below, which explains the purposes of assessment.

Formative		
	Diagnostic/Prescriptive	Embedded
Type	Quick diagnostic tests used to prescribe appropriate learning for a student or group of students	Assessments aligned objectives with criteria for mastery which enable teachers to check mastery within the context of instruction
Frequency	Daily, Weekly	Unit, Monthly
Purpose	To assist classroom teacher in modifying instruction for all learners	Analysis and planning; identification of groups at-risk students for further monitoring or diagnosis

ASSESSMENT CONTINUUM

Many maintains that “teachers and administrators absolutely must be assessment literate.” It is not unusual for schools using common formative assessments to realize gains of more than one standard deviation, with the largest gains evident for low-achievers.

When teachers work together to analyze and understand assessment results, they discover new ways of meeting the instructional needs of students. Collaboration around assessment also provides teachers with regular job-embedded staff development as it increases their knowledge of content and their mastery of instructional strategies.

Analysis of data: Dr. Many believes that a commitment to “collective inquiry” and establishing a “results orientation” can lead schools to continuous improvement. Results—that is, evidence of learning provided by assessment data—should be carefully studied. When teachers collaborate on this study, they move beyond the “data rich, but information poor” condition common in many schools today.

Key to the effective use of data is that it be available in a timely manner and presented in a format that is meaningful to teachers. Further, teachers must have time to talk about the data and link it to instructional planning.

Many suggests a simple, 30-minute “What? So What? Now What?” format for collaborative data analysis and instructional planning. Teams spend the first five minutes of the meeting looking for patterns in the data and creating fact statements to answer the question “What?”—that is, what does the data tell us? The next 10 minutes are used to answer the question “So What?” as teams analyze what the data indicates about instructional pacing and the need for re-teaching and/or enrichment. Finally, teams spend the remaining 15 minutes addressing the question “Now What?” and planning future instruction, designing student support, and setting measurable goals for achievement.

Designing interventions: It’s no secret that struggling students need additional time and support to achieve. In the traditional “factory model” of schooling, the amount of instructional time and support available to students are constants that determine

the level of learning possible in a school. Students are frequently given a set amount of information to learn in a set period of time—and they are graded on the quality of what they accomplish. Failure occurs when instruction can’t be adjusted to accommodate individual needs within this fixed structure.

In schools utilizing a collaborative structure, *student learning*



EVALUATING INTERVENTIONS

Dr. Many suggests using the “SPEED” criteria, described below, to evaluate intervention plans.

- **Systematic:** The intervention plan must be schoolwide, independent of individual teachers, and communicated in writing to everyone: staff, parents, and students.
- **Practical:** The plan must be affordable, using the school’s available resources (time, space, staff, and materials) and it must be sustainable and replicable.
- **Effective:** The intervention plan must be available and operational early enough in the school year to make a difference for students. It must have flexible entrance and exit criteria to respond to the changing needs of students.
- **Essential:** The plan must focus on agreed-upon standards and be targeted to each student’s learning needs as determined by formative and summative assessments.
- **Directive:** The intervention plan must be mandatory—not invitational—and part of students’ regular school day. Students cannot opt out, and parents and teachers cannot waive a student’s participation.

	→ Summative	
	Periodic	Annual
Criteria to measure mastery of	Administered for each grade two to four times a year to enable teacher teams to see how students are progressing toward mastery of standards that will be included on state assessments	State assessments and norm-referenced achievement tests that provide an annual assessment of each student’s progress and the school’s progress by subject area and grade level
Frequency	Quarterly, Semester	Once per year
Use of data for analysis	Analysis and planning of instruction; calibrating performance to benchmarks	Ranks and benchmarks

This summary of Dr. Many’s presentation was prepared by Elizabeth Kaufman, SCOE’s director of program improvement



Tom Many believes that schools must shift away from thinking about **teaching** to focus on **learning**.

determines how support and time is allocated, with different levels of intervention provided based on individual academic or social/emotional needs. These schools must provide “best first instruction” in the classroom, says Many, then develop a pyramid of intervention programs

that support learning in academic subjects and organization/study skills. This intervention plan is designed and implemented through frequent, common formative assessments.

One example of an elementary intervention program is the 9:1 system, which combines common pacing and formative assessments to provide extra time and support for struggling students. Using a 10-day common pacing map, grade-level teams adjust their pacing so that all instruction planned for the cycle is condensed into nine days. On the tenth day, teachers regroup students based on the results of common assessments to provide differentiated support.

A similar example from secondary schools calls for shortening each period by a few minutes, resulting in a new school-wide support/enrichment period after lunch.

Collaborating with a clear purpose: Building a collaborative culture has been the focus of many reform efforts, with varied results—but collaboration alone is not enough to improve student achievement. Through traditional collaboration, staff can develop increasingly close or congenial relationships, but the practices of teaching and learning remain unchanged. As Dr. Many has practiced collaboration through professional learning communities, school teams work together with a clear purpose: to clarify essential standards, establish instructional pacing, develop formative assessments, analyze achievement outcomes, and plan for intervention and instructional improvement.

The difference between traditional school collaboration and collaboration in professional learning communities is that the focus moves beyond the question of “Are teachers collaborating?” to “What are teachers collaborating about?” Studies of professional learning communities demonstrate that this focused collaboration changes relationships among staff, provides greater satisfaction and self-efficacy for team members, and increases accountability among and between teachers—all of which results in increased achievement for all students.

“When teachers are very clear about the content of their collaboration, student performance grows,” explains Many. He cites several examples where this is the case. In Allen Parish, Louisiana—a district where 62 percent of students qualify for free/reduced lunch and 27 percent are minorities—achievement on state testing grew 20 percent. Similar results were noted in Peace River, Alberta, and in District 96. Dr. Many also referenced Mike Schmoker’s writing and presentations and pointed out that schools “with strong professional learning communities are four times more likely to be improving academically than schools with weaker professional communities.”



In his closing remarks, Dr. Many followed the “work smarter not harder” thread explored in his book, *Learning by Doing*. The choice facing educators today is not “Shall we do the work of maintaining traditional schools or create professional learning communities?” says Many. The real issue is to honestly assess which *kind* of work offers the greatest hope for student success and professional satisfaction for educators, and to focus on the work that has the most impact and makes the most sense.

“We have always worked hard in education. Will we now choose to work smart?” Many asks. “If we know there is a better way, how can we not make this choice?”

Learn more: See a video clip from Tom Many’s presentation and access related articles he’s written at www.scoe.org. ♦



Carl Wong, Ed.D., Superintendent of Schools
5340 Skylane Boulevard, Santa Rosa, CA 95403-8246
(707) 524-2600 ■ www.scoe.org

	Formative  Summative			
	Diagnostic/Prescriptive	Embedded	Periodic	Annual
Type 	Quick diagnostic tests used to prescribe appropriate learning for a student or group of students	Assessments aligned to objectives with criteria for mastery which enable teachers to check mastery within the context of instruction	Administered for each grade two to four times a year to enable teacher teams to see how students are progressing toward mastery of standards that will be included on state assessments	State assessments and norm-referenced achievement tests that provide an annual assessment of each student's progress and the school's progress by subject area and grade level
Frequency	Daily, Weekly	Unit, Monthly	Quarterly, Semester	Once per year
Purpose	To assist classroom teacher in modifying instruction for all learners	Analysis and planning; identification of groups of at-risk students for further monitoring or diagnosis	Analysis and planning of instruction; calibrating performance to benchmarks	Ranks and benchmarks

ASSESSMENT CONTINUUM