

An Expectation of Collaboration

W. Richard Smith, Deputy Superintendent
Sanger Unified School District, Sanger, CA

An Expectation of Collaboration

I recently took a flight across California in an extremely small commuter airplane. I was seated directly behind the pilot and co-pilot and could hear them as they went about their preparations for the flight. They began this process by first announcing to one another where the flight was bound. They then moved through their checklist of pre-flight items announcing loudly to one another, “check!” At one point the co-pilot called out the fuel levels and the weight of the plane. Only after they completed this process did they go about the business of starting and flying the plane to our destination.

These two highly trained, professional pilots had just undertaken and applied a collaborative approach to ensuring that everyone on our plane traveled safely and that we all arrived at the intended destination. As I reflected upon their exchange I was struck by the absence of this type of collaboration among teachers and education professionals. These pilots had worked as a team focusing on a shared goal, working interdependently, and holding one another mutually accountable to ensure that the work was done correctly to accomplish their mission.

Interdependence, mutual accountability, and a focus on a shared goal are the attributes of successful teams in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) environment. Teachers working in a PLC environment work collaboratively focused on ensuring the learning of all students. They strive to answer four basic questions that drive the process of collaboration;

What do we want our students to learn?

How will we know when they have learned it?

How will we respond when learning has not occurred?

How will we respond when learning has already taken place?

Tradition holds that individual teachers, working in isolation, seek to answer these questions for their students. In a PLC approach, a team of teachers works to answer these questions together for the benefit of all students that they serve. The team seeks to support one another as they work for the solutions to what is to be learned, how they will assess learning, how they re-teach those who have not learned, and how to enrich and deepen the learning for

those students who have already learned a concept. Teachers working in a PLC review data, discuss best practices, and learn from and support one another.

Like the pilots of my airplane, teachers working collaborative make sure that the team knows the destination; they check the important data, provide for the safety of their passengers, and then ensure that everyone reaches the destination. When and if problems occur, the team works together to overcome them. The questions then become how can we ensure that our teachers work as a PLC and why haven't they to this point? A culture of isolation and lack of training often appear as the biggest culprits.

For decades America's teachers have been trained to focus on the curriculum, manage their classrooms, and implement strategies as individual teachers in their own classrooms. Little or no time was spent discussing how we might share and collaborate to overcome the myriad of obstacles that confront the instruction and learning of the children that come to us. It is no wonder that, when confronted by a class of 20-35 varied learners who come from a broad spectrum of backgrounds, at varying levels of proficiency and needs, individual teachers feel overwhelmed or unprepared to provide solutions. As a team of teachers working together in a PLC, these obstacles are not removed, but the selection of potential solutions, strategies, and approaches provides each team member greater opportunity to meet the needs of their students.

The pilots of my airplane did not show up one day, get handed the keys to the plane, and decide to fly it to a destination. They were trained and given opportunities to develop and learn their profession. A major component to their training was learning to work together collaboratively. We must take on this same work in the education profession. We must train teachers to know their curriculum, classroom management, and instructional strategies, but we must also teach them how to work collaboratively. We must teach them how to work in a PLC focused on student learning. We must remove the perceived expectation and traditional acceptance of isolation in teacher training. We must train teachers to work as a team of professionals supporting one another, and this must become the norm and rather than the exception.

When I get on an airplane my expectation is that the pilot and co-pilot are a team and are working together to get me to my destination. Should we expect less from teachers with their students?