How can teachers maximize collaboration to grow professionally and increase student achievement?

Evidence shows that teachers are the most significant in-school factor affecting student learning. When teachers work in isolation, they are not benefitting from their colleagues' expertise or sharing their instructional practices with others. Providing opportunities for education professionals to engage in collaboration is critical to their long-term development and can positively impact student outcomes.

The information in this document was developed to explore the benefits and support structures necessary to ensure educators are collaborating effectively.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

Comprehensive studies on the subject of educator collaboration are clear – schools that invest in developing structures and protocols to promote collaboration have a more positive impact on student outcomes than those that do not. Three conditions for successful collaboration include building relationships with colleagues, engaging in common planning times and sharing responsibility for the work.

Effective professional relationships are the result of collaboration with colleagues and the larger school community. A team of teachers may differ in teaching philosophies, years of experience and roles in a school. However, these differences may boost professional growth in an environment of mutual respect and collegiality.

Professionalism is key to building trust and rapport with colleagues. Teaching requires

emotional commitment, and the work can be exhausting. When team members are able to identify each other's strengths, find common ground for the well-being of students and continually reflect on their actions, they develop relationships based on trust and empathy, which in turn fosters a collaborative support structure.

Another important structure essential to effective collaboration is providing teachers with common planning time. Many schools are finding innovative ways to structure master schedules that prioritize collaborative time for teachers to learn with and from one another to develop rigorous curricula for students. Virtual collaboration leverages the use of technology tools in asynchronous formats to promote flexibility and extend teacher collaboration time.

Successful collaboration occurs when teachers take collective responsibility for student success and continuous improvement. Focusing on instruction and assessment with colleagues gives impetus to analyze instructional practices and make changes. When team members clearly define their roles in the group, communication pathways are opened. Collaboration time stays focused on increasing student achievement and implementing high-quality instructional materials.

ATTENDING TO EQUITY

Recent surveys of American teachers found that "on-the-job peer collaboration is occurring, but it is far from universal." When done well, teacher collaboration can drive equity-focused changes to many facets of teaching, including ensuring that all students are making progress toward the highest levels of achievement. Teachers who dive deeply into conversations about student learning include all student groups in their problem-solving and vision-casting. For example, collaboration between English learner specialists and content-area teachers can unify their approaches in working with students learning English. When teachers share effective learning strategies with diverse learners, they learn from peer leaders and build a schoolwide culture that prioritizes success for all.

Too often teachers have few opportunities to think deeply about their practice in professional learning communities. Collaboration time should be focused and structured to maximize learning opportunities for teachers and outcomes for students. Devoting collaborative time to rich discussion is preferable to focusing on procedural or administrative topics that could be addressed in staff meetings or via email. Additionally, school leaders can use data such as school climate surveys to identify gaps in training for teachers. In any collaborative setting, all teachers' voices must be heard, and all students' learning needs must be addressed.

RECOMMENDED ACTION STEPS

- Establish clear guidelines, roles and purposes for collaborative learning sessions to ensure all voices are heard and respected.

- Explore strategies for implementing collaboration time that have worked in multiple school settings.

- Study instructional calendars to assess where opportunities may exist for educators to collaborate. Paraprofessionals and support staff may be able to provide class coverage to facilitate teacher collaboration.

- Implement techniques of successful learning communities to boost intentionality and effectiveness.

- Focus on shared responsibility to increase accountability for collaboration that yields improved student achievement and teacher well-being.

OKLAHOMA Education