Treasure Mountain Treasury #1

Using Online Resources

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CHAPTER 10
THE COLLABORATIVE SCHOOL

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There was a riot in the virtual classroom. "Get off your ivory tower," my graduate students were saying to me rather bluntly, "You are asking us to lead a charge for literacy into the kingdom of the classroom. Sorry, we're not invited." They went on describing how desperate classroom teachers are; how much pressure there is to perform; how much stress teachers feel; and how teachers really just want to be left alone to cover what will be on the test. Specialists keep out.

It seems that everyone has been trying to "fix" the classroom. If only those teachers would buckle down and "teach," scores would rise and all would be well. Consider the loud voices from every camp:

- Governments are setting the standards, dictating the assessments and setting the bar, then backing it all up with threats.

- Researchers are pressed to find the "right ways" to teach and learn.

- Professional consultants, through their literature, point to various solutions: understanding by design, professional learning communities, differentiation, inquiry, and direct teaching, among others.

The various prescriptions for what ails the classroom teacher and the pressure to learn one technique, then another, and another makes teaching a very unattractive profession these days. Coupled with the changing nature of the students with diverse cultures, languages, and backgrounds, teachers are facing overwhelming expectations.

On another front, researchers are learning more and more about how the brain works and how it learns and responds to various stimuli. Thus, there is a plethora of books directed toward the classroom teacher about brain-ways of teaching. If we add the body of literature on learning styles to the mix, the teaching process has grown more and more complex over the past few decades. But we still rely on a single teacher in front of a classroom of 20-40 learners from diverse backgrounds.

Is there something wrong with this pressure on a single individual? As the world has become a complex information and technology environment, many other professions such

as medicine, science, business, manufacturing, and even agribusiness recognize that no one mind can "do it all." Many favor the team approach to accomplish work and make progress. We now think of medical teams, research groups, think tanks, business partnerships, and other group solutions when a single mind cannot know it all or get it all done. Yet, we still think of the single teacher in front of a single classroom. It is a deep-seated tradition. With the dawn of a flat world, it seems time to concentrate on providing every child with a world-class education and build the educational structure around this newly competitive individual. Perhaps it is time to think seriously about the team in education.

What does it take to educate the "whole child" as ASCD envisions?[28] Is there some merit in building an organization around the learner rather than requiring the learner to adjust to the organization we furnish that is founded on long-standing tradition?

Looking at the research connected to organization and leadership in schools, Tim Waters and Greg Cameron at McRel have developed The Balanced Leadership Framework™ that provides a number of strategies for designing a "purposeful community" or a collaborative bent on excellence.[29] Two of their characteristics are particularly attractive:

- The use of all available assets

- Collective efficacy

The vision here is to combine the tangible assets such as computers, the library, textbooks, and teaching supplies with the intangible assets such as leadership, strategy, innovation, and adaptability in a determined collaborative push toward excellence.

The Outsourced Model. Over the last century, the school organization has built appendages to the classroom, each with a special but discrete function designed to supplement the classroom. We refer to various specialists who pull learners out of the classroom for specialized instruction. These professionals include librarians, technology specialists, literacy coaches (and other specialized coaches), counselors, nurses, and the fine arts teachers. There are organizational reasons to "outsource" the teaching of certain skills in order to build in planning periods for teachers or to fill out the number of periods in a school day. Teachers often complain about the number of "pull outs" that cut their teaching time, but the attraction of fewer students has often silenced criticism. Recently, with the pressure to teach basic skills, the amount of time devoted to the teaching of reading, math,

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28 The Whole Child: An Initiative of ASCD. Find at ascd.org.

29 Waters, Tim and Greg Cameron. The Balanced Leadership Framework™ Denver, CO: McRel, 2007. 64p. See the description of the entire purposeful community on pp. 45-53.

and now science has increased, but at the expense of corollary disciplines such as fine arts, social studies, and other electives.

The Role of Specialists. Over the years, specialists of many stripes have developed what they consider essential elements of a world-class learner. Examples include:

- Librarians who advocate information literacy, the love of reading, and the wise use of technology.

- Technology leaders who seek the wise use of a wide variety of technologies required for participation in a 21st century environment.

- Literacy coaches who wish every learner to be a skilled and fluent reader

- Counselors who want learners to look toward the future as part of current behavior and career planning.

- Nurses and many PE teachers who are concerned with wellness rather than just prowess on the athletic field or the treating of a current physical problem.

- Art, music, and drama specialists who want learners to experience the best of culture.

As one examines the literature of these specialists, one finds the idea of collaboration a common element. Most specialists have been taught in their fields that one of their roles is to collaborate with classroom teachers and to integrate their specialized agendas with the agenda of the classroom teacher. Yet, these specialists have a common complaint: they can't seem to get into the kingdom.

Lacking resources for a full cohort of specialists, principals often move positions around. Because a literacy coach is hired, a librarian is fired. Because two salaries are not available, a technology leader, librarian, or fine arts specialist serves more than one school in an attempt to maintain the outsourcing of popular programs with parents. But in spreading the specialists so thin, most of their impact is lost.

The Mud Puddles of Specialists. The various specialists in a school building have varying challenges that overwhelm them and gobble up every available minute, or so it seems. There is always a computer to be fixed, books to be shelved, another child in physical distress, or a misbehaving student to be dealt with. During a typical day, so many "emergencies" develop that specialists, over-tired from run, run, run often admit that they contributed little to the excellence of the school. In times of financial stress, when specialists are discontinued, the specialist's role is pushed back to the classroom teacher who now must teach art, reading skills, information literacy, or careers. It doesn't happen.

Consider a Collaborative Model. If the McRel survey of research on leaderships is as strong as it appears toward a collaborative model, purposeful community[30] or the professional learning community model of the Dufour's,[31] then a structured "tweak" of the entire school community that collaboratively builds around the needs of the learner is not only possible but desirable.

Collaboration is not a new concept in schools. Everyone seems to talk about it as a success factor, but in practice, the specialists of the school are not envisioned as essential players. Occasionally in the professional literature, a mention will be made of a specialist doing this or contributing that. Most often they are just ignored. In my own interviews of the authors of many professional books, the authors write directly to the classroom teacher and "presume," but don't mention, the existence of the specialist. Magically, there is supposed to be a reliable computer network in place; of course there are 10,000 books down the hall in the library that can provide multiple reading levels when the textbook doesn't work; or, theoretically there is a coach beside the teacher as they struggle to build tough reading skills; but these are only theoretical ideas that somehow don't really happen.

Consider an organizational structure where true collaboration among the entire faculty of the school can and does happen:

The Collaboration Specialists Team:
- Librarians
- Technology specialists
- Literacy and other Coaches
- Counsilors
- Art, Music, PE
- Nurses

Classroom
Classroom
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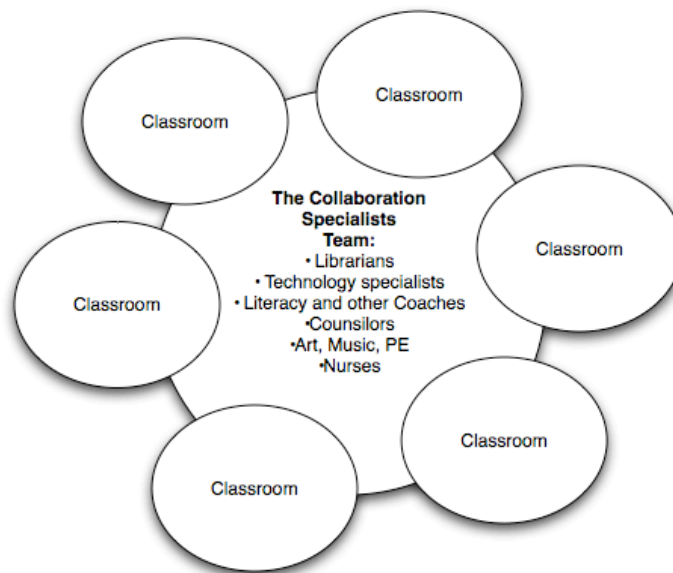
The Collaborative School Culture

For units of instruction where deep understanding is essential, the classroom teacher links into the specialist pool to collaboratively design, team teach, and assess instructional units.

30 Check the McRel.org website for the Balanced Leadership Profile.

31 DuFour, Richard, Rebert Eaker, and Rebecca DuFour. On Common Ground: The Power of Professional Learning Communities. National Educational Services, 2005. Also check our the numerous books by the DuFours published by Solution Tree.

In this true collaborative culture, teachers don't just reach out to a friend at the same grade level or department for support, they naturally expect and reach for the expertise of the specialist team of the school. As teachers, their classroom merges with the library, the computer lab, and the art and music room to embrace whatever resources are available and to team-teach alongside various specialists. In other words, teachers and specialists combine their talents to reach every learner.

In such a school, administrators structure the organization around planning and collaboration, not just among grade level teams or departments, but in such a way that it is natural for one or more specialists to be integrated into the planning, teaching, and assessment of learning experiences. The idea that two or more heads are better than one becomes a reality, not a buzzword.

In the collaborative school, the idea of integration is natural. Together the teacher and the librarian help learners understand the major elements of the Civil War as they learn research skills to answer essential questions. In such an experience, the content information is boosted by learning or research skills. Thus, I as a student know how to learn and I learn more in less time because I have the tools to learn and the adults to mentor me through the process. If the Civil War unit includes visual timelines of factors such as battles, political developments, the role of slaves over the time of war, the economic factors over time, along with the music and art of the period, then we as students may have to go to the computer lab to learn to make timeline videos that we will upload to YouTube; we may have to know how to research in the databases of the Library of Congress; we may need to appreciate the spirituals of the slaves; or we may need to include other aspects of the period as we build a deep understanding of that period and how it affects the way we still live and work today. As a learner, I recognize that I have multiple adults mentoring and coaching me through a learning experience and I am accountable to them all.

In such a school, professional development happens when specialists and teachers team up. The teacher learns how to help build a wiki. The technologist discovers new ideas and resources for teaching how the North won the Battle of Gettysburg. The nurse helps teachers and students understand that to be wounded was almost as bad as getting killed outright (a good reason that we all wash our hands frequently every day). In other words, the specialists and teachers build on each other's expertise as they combine their agendas. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Specialists teach their knowledge to classroom teachers; classroom teachers teach their learning strategies to the specialists. Students share their expertise with the adults, the adults with the learners. We become a teaching team and a learning community.

Are we saying that every classroom teacher would have a cadre of specialists swarming over every learner? Actually, there are schools with a sizeable number of specialists already functioning.[32] We are back to the question about asking what a world-class education costs and then building an organization around that idea. One only need to ask teachers who have full support to discover why they value their jobs in such schools. And, the taxpayers in those schools realize that their sacrifice is part of a long-standing tradition that the current generation boosts the next one to heights they themselves were unable to attain.

In almost every school, there are specialists performing their roles independent of the classroom. Perhaps it is time to make those specialists a team among themselves and an integrated team with the classroom teacher.

How It Works

The specialists of the school should be organized into a team that is anxious to collaborate in the classroom to improve learning experiences. This presumes that each member of the specialist team is already a good teacher in their own right and understands instructional design as it is practiced in the school. Each specialist is selected for their position based on their competence not only in library, technology, art, counseling, or other areas, but for their ability to collaborate and team-teach. As a team, they might even have offices close to one another in a library that has been transformed into a learning/consultancy center. They would form a professional learning community as they learn the art of collaboration.

Working from a curriculum map, both teachers and specialists begin to understand what will be taught across the school year and how both the objectives of the classroom and the agendas of the specialists will be integrated to plan what topics will be covered and which ones will be developed more in-depth. The specialists will probably choose the more in-depth units in which to combine their agendas with those of the classroom.

Before a unit begins, the classroom teacher or group of teachers would meet with one or more specialists to plan the unit, including the standards to be achieved, the joint assessment, and the team-taught learning activities. Each phase of the learning activity is the concern of the whole team, so as administrators are observing and encouraging, it becomes obvious that the team is pushing and achieving together. Each successful unit becomes a showcase of the possible. Less successful interactions are revised and reinvented. It is a series of one, then another, and another successful and documented experience. Accounts of such collaborative units can be seen at http://davidvl.or under the

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32 For example, at Hunderton Central High School in Flemington NJ, there are six persons on the library staff and another dozen on the technology staff so that there are enough consultants to service the needs of both teachers and students.

heading of action research. Here, teachers and librarians examine collaborative teaching and its effect on learning.

As the popularity of collaboration grows, the number of specialists and time they have to collaborate becomes an issue. In this case, the specialist team adopts the following model:

- We plan together.

- We team-teach the activities.

- We jointly assess the results.

- We specialists release the unit back to the classroom teacher.

As an example, a teacher is faced with teaching the colonial period and a textbook that most students cannot understand. Books, articles, and multimedia on various reading levels are gathered with help from the librarian and the teacher and librarian conduct "literature circles" where groups or pairs of students try to understand life in the northern, middle, and southern colonies. Wanting the learners to understand the diversity of life in the colonies, the technology specialist teaches both the adults and the students how to enter facts into a collaboratively-built Google spreadsheet. The entire group then analyzes the columns and rows to compare and contrast what is going on in the various sections of the new world.

At the end of the unit, the teacher is happy because the English language learners actually understand the basic elements of the colonial period. The librarian is pleased because of the opportunity to push wide reading across all reading levels. The technology leader is happy that both adults and students have learned a new technology, but more importantly, have used that technology for a group compare and contrast to see a bigger picture of colonial life. As the team surveys the assessments, they take pride in the percentage of the learners who not only met the objectives, but exceeded them. When the same unit comes around the next year, the team opts to let the teacher do the colonial period alone because she has both the materials and the knowledge of the technology in her repertoire. Instead, they decide to partner on the development of the Revolutionary War unit. The group has used the team-release model and is able to develop more and better learning experiences over time.

Another strategy of the specialist team is to work with groups of teachers teaching the same topic across grade levels, with a department, or even with two departments (an integration of social studies and literature as an example). The goal of the specialist team becomes a bragging list of memorable learning experiences across the disciplines and across the grade levels of the school. These units are showcased to the community as examples of exemplary teaching and learning. The team has worked hard to insure that every learner not only meets, but also exceeds basic standards. Perhaps, this is the wole

point: teams don't just strive to meet standards for every learner; they push on beyond toward excellence.

The collaborative school requires a shift in perspective, not just of the classroom teacher, but by the specialists themselves who may be quite accustomed to working in isolation. A few expectations might be in order for all the team players:

Expectations of Specialists in the Collaborative School

- Build your skill as an excellent teacher in addition to the skills you possess as a specialist. You are a "teaching" specialist just as interested in the content learning of the learning experience as you are in teaching about your specialty.

- Build the skills of team-teaching rather than "turn" teaching.

- Be a creative, caring, and hardworking team partner.

- Learn how to reach learners with special problems until you have confidence that the team is meeting the needs of every learner in the classroom.

- Learn how to integrate your own agenda as a specialist into the agenda of the classroom teacher.

- Teach the teacher your expertise and learn from the teacher all you can about their specialty so you can pull on each other's strengths and develop ones in common.

- Figure out how to spend half the time you have in a school teaming and the other half doing your specialty role managing the computer labor or library media center, etc.).

Expectations of Classroom Teachers

- Build your expectations of collaboration with the idea that two or more heads are better than one.

- Cultivate the idea that drawing on another's strengths is not a sign of weakness.

- Ask the specialist to join you in collaborative partnership that desires to push egos aside and focus on increased learning opportunities for students.

- Teach specialists about your expertise and learn their expertise so that all the adults become knowledgeable coaches of learners.

- Realize that while planning time may be increased, teaming with specialists is more likely to produce memorable learning experiences than solo performances.

Expectations of Administrators

- Hire specialists who are excellent teachers in addition to being good at their specialty.

- Begin with the expectation that each specialist will spend half their time in the building collaborating on the planning, teaching, and assessment of learning activities with either single classroom teachers or groups of teachers.

- Work with the specialists to streamline their outsourced organizational responsibilities so that the time to collaborate is available.

- Create an organizational structure where both classroom teachers and specialists have the time to meet, plan, and evaluate their collaborative activities.

- Encourage higher learning opportunities by being willing to step outside long-lived school protocols and outdated methodologies.

Conclusion. As we all learn how to function and prosper in a global community, we think in terms of constantly reinventing the way we work, learn, and communicate. Old industrial models give way to new methods of productivity where the lives of everyone are enhanced. Such 21st century aspirations require educators both to ask for more resources, and to use also the resources they have in better and better ways.

For too long, the specialists in a school have been ignored and under-appreciated because they were outsource agents that were like butter on the bread: nice to have but not essential. In the collaborative school, the specialists form a team alongside the teaching staff with mutual expectations, responsibilities, and the motivation to serve every learner. It is a resource in every school that has long been ignored. It is a resource that can lift learning opportunities to new heights. It seems like an idea worth trying.

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Observation Guide:

During the observation period, the researcher will construct observation notes of the following activities or behaviors:

Librarian observations:

- Helping behaviors (e.g. assisting w/ assignment)
- Directing behaviors (e.g. showing where a book is shelved)
- Managing behaviors (e.g. asking for student passes)
- Instructional behaviors (e.g. teaching use of catalog)
- Position of TL in library (e.g. in stacks, behind desk)
- Other activities (provide descriptions)

Class Behaviors

- How the class enters, leaves the library
- Evidence of preparation for the assignment
- Evidence of library procedures, pre-knowledge of library routines

Student observations:

- Student behaviors with resources (e.g. book or internet use)
- Student interpersonal (e.g. collaborative work, assisting, socializing)
- Interaction with Librarian (describe)

Teacher/Adult observations:

- Interaction with Librarian (describe)
- Interaction with students in class.

Documents Obtained with Teacher consent:

- Sample assignment, assignment rubric

Collaborative Teacher-librarian Interview Protocol:

This instrument is used after the observed library activity. The interview is completed with the teacher-librarian only.

Questions:

1. I'd like to begin by asking you to summarize the visit to the library and the activity the class performed.

2. How did you prepare for this activity with the teacher?

3. What aspects of the activity/visit worked well?

4. What aspects of the activity/visit did not work well?

5. How did this library activity support student learning?

6. How will you follow-up this activity? What are the next steps?

7. Was this visit typical of the class' activities in the library? If not, how was it different?

8. How often does this teacher bring his/her class to the library?

9. How often does this teacher send individual students to the library?

10. Aside from class visits like this one, in what other ways do you work with this teacher?

Wrap-Up:

Is there anything else that I didn't ask that you would like to tell me?

Collaborative Classroom Teacher Interview Protocol:

This instrument is used after the observed library activity. The interview is completed with the classroom teacher only.

Questions:

1. I'd like to begin by asking you to summarize the visit to the library and the activity the class performed.

2. How did you prepare for this activity with the librarian?

3. What aspects of the activity/visit worked well?

4. What aspects of the activity/visit did not work well?

5. How does this activity support student learning?

6. How will you follow-up with this activity? What are the next steps?

7. Was this visit typical of the class' activities in the library? If not, how was it different?

8. How often do you take the class to the library?

9. How often do you send individual students to the library?

10. Aside from class visits like this one, in what other ways do you work with the librarian and/or library resources?

Wrap-Up:

Is there anything else that I didn't ask that you would like to tell me?

Classroom Teacher Interview Protocol:

This instrument is used with classroom teachers selected to discuss their perceptions and uses of the school library.

Questions:

1. How have you been involved in the transition to small schools/ academies/ learning communities?

2. Do you teach differently since the change to small schools/ academies/ learning communities?   Alternate: Do you teach differently compared to other teaching experiences?

   2.1 Do students learn differently in this environment?

3. What is the role of the library and librarian in your school? Are those roles changing with small schools?

4. How skilled are your students at finding information? At evaluating information?

   4.1 What skills are they missing?

   4.2 What's the best way to teach them these skills?

5. Do you create some of your class assignments with the intent that students will use the school library?

   5.1 How often do you bring the class to the library?

   5.2 Does the library have the right materials?

   5.3 Do you work with the librarian to create the assignment?

6. In a small schools environment, has the demand changed for using the library? Prompts: collections, space, computers, etc.?

   6.1 Do the different schools/ academies / communities have different needs?

7. What are the strengths of your high school library? What are the weaknesses?

Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about the teacher-librarian or library?