

Collective Practice: Strategies for Sustainable Improvement

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Policy-makers and partners seeking to catalyze sustainable growth in school and system instructional capacity need to broaden the prevailing policy focus beyond teaching as an isolated act.

This article grew out of the discussions at a series of four cross-sector gatherings on teaching quality in 2008–2009 by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and Kronley & Associates, in partnership with the Ford Foundation. The article draws on a summary of convening themes developed by Annenberg Institute research associate Tracie Potochnik, with help from Annenberg Institute research associate Joanne Thompson and documentation by Kate Shropshire Swett of Kronley & Associates.

How many of us have read, or written, in the past few years, a variation on this line: the quality of teachers and teaching is the single most important in-school factor in student learning? Recognizing teachers as the most important actors in learning improvement has become a new orthodoxy of education reform.

In many ways, this is a common-sense assertion. What else would we expect it to be? It is hard to imagine any form of technology, any single curriculum, or any school-level environmental issue trumping the human knowledge base and delivery system around which the traditional classroom is organized. But several well-regarded

and definitive studies over the past decade have also put real and useful data behind common wisdom.¹

While that evidence base was being built, the teaching landscape and both student and teacher demographics were changing dramatically. Frustration with achievement gaps, stagnant performance, and bureaucratic inadequacy led to a search for new means for getting better teachers in classrooms. Many urban school districts have ongoing partnerships with organizations like Teach for America and the New Teacher Project to recruit, hire, and train teachers, especially for their hardest-to-staff schools. Teacher residencies and grow-your-own programs are beginning to spring up as joint efforts of school districts, reform

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¹ See Susan Moore Johnson's article in this issue of *VUE* for citations of some of this research.

support organizations, and universities. And the very nature of the economy and changed attitudes toward work and careers means that there is no longer one pathway into classroom teaching.

These changes in on-the-ground practice and the growing evidence base about the importance of effective teaching combine powerfully to produce today's policy spotlight on teaching quality. The collective emphasis on the "teaching solution" may also reflect a recognition that concentrating on the critical in-school factor in learning improvement, as challenging as it may be, seems less daunting than influencing the array of economic, health, social, cultural, and political factors that are not containable within school walls.

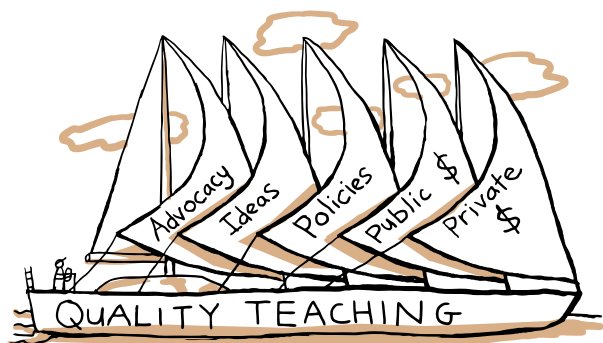
The Importance of Collective Practice: A Growing Knowledge Base

The desire to understand what makes for effective teaching and how it can be measured and compensated, incentivized and mandated, is the focus of a great deal of current philanthropic initiative, think tank attention, and federal funding. With teaching quality one of the four assurances required for Race to the Top competitiveness, the federal definition of effective and highly effective teachers is enormously influential, even though only two states, thus far, have been awarded funds.² Final RTTT guidelines allow "multiple measures" of teaching effectiveness, and other aspects of education stimu-

lus funding support teachers working together. But the weight of attention, policy, and resources is disproportionately directed to the individual teacher. In the current policy environment, there is also strong pressure at state and local levels for individual accountability, propelled by new technologies that enable value-added assessment.

It is neither surprising nor inappropriate that increased calls for test-based student accountability are paralleled by new pressures for individual teacher accountability. But while more accountability – and support and reward – for individual practitioners is a necessary condition for widespread improvements in adults' teaching and students' learning, it is not sufficient.

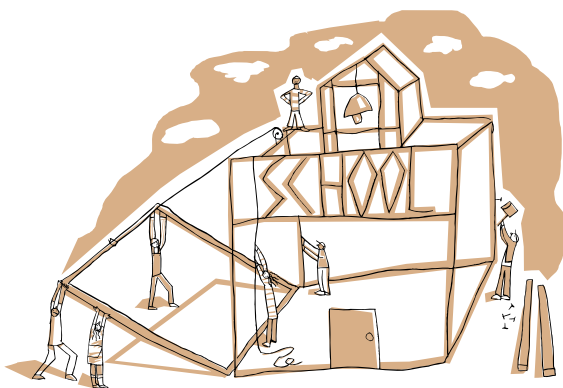
The lack of attention to teaching as a collective activity ignores a significant and emerging knowledge base about collective practice. In the private sector, collaborative work is increasingly the norm among skilled professionals. And among systems considered global leaders in educational achievement, professional collaboration is increasingly the preferred approach to educators' continued learning, as well as their teaching (McKinsey Education 2009).



² For purposes of the ARRA stimulus funds, an effective teacher is one "whose students achieve acceptable rates (e.g. at least one grade level in an academic year) of student growth." To be highly effective, a teacher's students must exhibit one and a half levels of growth in a given academic year (U.S. Department of Education 2010, p. 19496).

The articles in this issue of *VUE* present several aspects of the growing knowledge base. Other leading researchers in school improvement and system change have also recently published works that weave together aspects of collective practice with these larger aims.

Reporting on fifteen years of data from public elementary schools in Chicago, the Consortium for Chicago School Research identified five key ingredients that work, in combination, to improve urban school success: strong leadership, strong instructional guidance and materials, a welcoming attitude toward parents, a stimulating and nurturing learning environment, and development of professional capacity. The researchers' definition of professional capacity includes not just quality of teaching staff, but also belief in the possibility of school change, good professional development, and collaborative work. As an author of the study, Penny Bender Sebring, noted, "This is a counter-narrative to a lot of the policy debates you hear now" (Viadero 2010).



Michael Fullan (2010), whose research and advisory work is based in both the public and private sectors, names "collective capacity" as one of seven big ideas for whole-system reform, calling it an underappreciated "hidden resource that we fail to understand and cultivate" (p. 4). Fullan details four examples of successful districtwide reform efforts that cultivate collective capacity: Tower Hamlets in London, Long Beach Unified School District in California, York Region District School Board in Toronto, and Ottawa Catholic District in Ontario. Fullan concludes:³

It is going to take the United States twenty years to transform the teaching profession *provided* that they combine individualistic and collective strategies. This is not a complaint about individual teachers: It is a system problem that will require a system response. (p. 81)

Recommendations Emerging from Cross- Stakeholder Discussions

The concept of collective capacity was powerfully captured and reinforced in a series of convenings our two organizations (the Annenberg Institute and Kronley & Associates) conducted in partnership with the Ford Foundation. In late 2008 and 2009, we brought together a diverse group of stakeholders with different perspectives on a host of topics related to teaching quality in hard-to-staff schools. Nearly forty leading superintendents, central office staff, school practitioners, charter network leaders, heads of reform support

³ See, also, Hargreaves and Shirley's (2009) discussion of "principles of professionalism" and "catalysts of coherence."

organizations, researchers, and policy-makers engaged in candid discussion during four facilitated meetings.

The following recommendations are informed by this exploration. The collective nature of teaching was a recurring theme in the expert stakeholder gatherings, with heavy emphasis on the relationships between school culture and educator capacity. The recommendations envision schools – especially those characterized as “hard-to-staff” – as learning communities for both teachers and students. In these communities, teaching is more than an individual task performed in isolation from colleagues. These schools vest responsibility and authority for effectively educating all students in collaborative efforts that consciously and actively promote professional growth. They are places where capacity is continually nurtured through connections both inside and outside the school building, and they are places that recognize and value other voices and different perspectives – especially those of families and nearby residents – in children’s education.

Interest in teaching as collaborative work does not seek to diminish the continuing emphasis – from federal and state policy-makers, district and school leaders, foundations, and reform support organizations – on the capacity of individual teachers and the need for every classroom teacher to meet high expectations. Understanding that teaching is not a solitary enterprise recognizes that teacher performance is inextricably intertwined with how schools are organized, how teachers view themselves, their students, and their work; the working conditions that support or hinder teachers’ efforts; and their relationships with students, families, and the communities in which

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they teach. Promoting teaching as a collaborative venture is not a mechanism to allow individuals to avoid accountability. In connecting individual effectiveness to organizational culture, this effort seeks instead to ensure that rigorous approaches to teaching permeate and help define a school.

We are far from the point where everyday focus on collective capacity is the norm in schools. For this to occur, we must first expect and enable teachers to work together consistently to improve student learning. This is a fundamental shift in how schools are organized and teachers deployed. Engendering this change requires commitment and actions on the part of multiple sectors, not all of which are public. The exploration that the Annenberg Institute and Kronley &

Associates undertook with the Ford Foundation underscored the seminal roles that funders, reform support organizations, and community-based organizing groups can play in identifying, fostering, and leveraging opportunities to promote collaborative and ongoing work by teachers.⁴

We suggest appropriate starting points in this section.

1. Modernize approaches to teaching as a profession.

Calls to “professionalize” teaching have been sounded for decades, but the calls for professionalization have not caught up with substantial changes in the nature of teaching. Practitioners and others must update how they view the work of teachers and how teaching as a career is designed and perceived. Autonomy – the capacity to make significant decisions based on knowledge and experience – has often been cited as a critical component of professionalism. Autonomy in decision-making is connected to more flexible and creative uses of time to reach a desired and defined end.

But autonomy alone is not enough – as Susan Moore Johnson points out in her article in this issue of *VUE*, the “egg crate” model of schooling, where each teacher and classroom are self-contained, does not work if there are large differences in teacher effectiveness. Professionalization also means that teachers are compensated based on performance – of both the individual and the group. Suggestions

4 Encouraging teachers to adopt collective practice strategies for school improvement is a key element of the Ford Foundation’s recently announced seven-site, seven-year, \$100 million initiative to transform secondary education in urban schools (for more information, see <www.fordfoundation.org>).

about differential compensation for individual teachers should be extended to rewarding teams of teachers for the results that they achieve.⁵

Performance-based compensation is one element that the larger issue of accountability comprises and is perhaps the most widely discussed today. One important ingredient of professional accountability is significant input from peers – in setting standards, in reviewing performance, and in determining appropriate rewards and sanctions. Viewing teaching as collaborative work enables peer review in an expanded and more powerful accountability context that promotes continuing rigor, impartial judgment, and transparent action.

Changing the way we think about teachers as professionals enables us to substitute collaboration for competition. Policy-makers and teacher-preparation programs can work together to create multiple professional pathways that take into account different career interests and that provide opportunities for outstanding teachers to advance in their careers and help develop other, less-skilled teachers.⁶ Lifelong classroom careers, hybrid teacher/coach roles, progressive leadership responsibility, and defined-term commitments might be included as some components of such an approach.

A more professional working environment that connects individuals to colleagues and a field will mean

5 See Jonathan Eckert’s article in this issue of *VUE* for one system that aims to do this.

6 See Carrie Leana’s article in this issue of *VUE* for an argument against “Teacher of the Year” awards.

little without these types of varied and defined pathways; these include not only pathways *within* the profession but also pathways *to* it. Despite some piecemeal attempts and much exhortation, there is no comprehensive, widely adopted scheme of clinical training for potential teachers. Foundations are particularly well positioned to encourage the creation and expansion of these models; some of the recent philanthropic and federal activity relating to teacher residency programs is a hopeful portent.

2. Foster social capital.

Much has been written recently about the centrality of comprehensive human capital strategies to fostering more effective teaching.⁷ Sometimes overlooked, or underemphasized, is the concept of *social capital* – the assets that are created from productive relationships within a school, between educators and students’ families and caregivers, and between schools and communities. Developing and exploiting this capital is, in part, a function of professionalization.⁸

Creation of professional learning communities and other collaborative enterprises that enable teachers to focus on student work and instructional quality is one example of how the use of in-school time may be changed to accommodate and advance institutionalized collective activity. This approach not only advances teacher learning, it reinforces professionalism by con-

7 See, for example, *VUE* no. 20, Summer 2008, Human Capital, available for download at <www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/archives>.

8 See Carrie Leana’s article in this issue of *VUE* for a discussion of social capital.

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tinually connecting teachers to a field. Rethinking how teachers relate to one another is a starting point for promoting increased personalization in their relationships with students and families. Effective professionals understand that serving clients often requires a deeper understanding of and connection to them. These relationships and the trust they can engender form the basis of more informed approaches to instructional issues and to the community.⁹

Effective community involvement will positively affect school culture and working conditions. Community-based organizations can play a key role in creating opportunities for enhanced social capital between schools and communities. This may include introducing educators to the community through open houses and community walk-throughs or participating in efforts to build deeper cultural understanding in schools.

9 See Milbrey McLaughlin and Joan Talbert’s article in this issue of *VUE* for a discussion of professional learning communities.

The evidence base is growing that community organizers who have real roots in a neighborhood and support in key areas from external partners can help parents build the capacity and the political will to become powerful partners in school reform, including fostering improvements in teaching quality.

Whatever the approach, getting real returns from social capital requires time and opportunity. Creating, testing the efficacy of, and disseminating the outcomes of different ways to use time is an important role for public and private funders. Without it, as one convening participant noted, “it is difficult for teachers to get out of survival mode and pursue progress and improvement.”

3. Create demand for effective and responsive teaching.

School capacity to shape the culture and conditions for more effective teaching is to some extent a function of community capacity to demand it. Philanthropic entities, reform support organizations, and community-based organizing groups have distinct and critical roles in creating demand. Understanding what effective teaching is and recognizing it when it is practiced are acquired traits that can be accelerated by information and training. Assessing the performance of teachers and schools depends on the availability of useful and accessible data.

Developing clear agendas about educational priorities and focusing on the means to reach these priorities are capacities that will enable citizens to make a case for change. Connecting to influentials – district leaders, policy-makers, business and civic leaders – is a way to ratchet up demand. In these ways, community capacity can increase to advocate for more conditions that will lead to more effective teaching. As a participant in our convenings noted, “People who live in neighborhoods with hard-to-staff schools have the capacity for change, but need a vehicle to articulate their capacity.”

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in key areas from external partners can help parents build the capacity and the political will to become powerful partners in school reform, including fostering improvements in teaching quality. Funders, universities, and researchers have played a fundamental role in providing support in a number of communities. The parent-led Community Collaborative to Improve District 9 Schools in the South Bronx (CC9), with capacity building and research support from the Institute for Education and Social Policy at New York University, built a historic partnership with the school district and the teachers union and designed a lead teacher program that was later adopted for all of New York City (Williams 2004). In Chicago, community organizers led the formation of a broad coalition with district officials, university teacher-preparation programs, the teachers union, and elected officials to develop and fund an innovative new statewide teacher pipeline that trained neighborhood residents as teachers in hard-to-staff schools (McAlister, Mediratta & Shah 2009).

4. Focus on the long term.

Change in school climate and culture is the product of comprehensive strategies that do not grow fully formed overnight. They contemplate deep-seated changes in teacher practice and, in doing so, address long-standing issues of capacity. As such, these strategies require time and must be enabled by policies that are systemic and sustainable at scale. These include policies that seek to:

- Improve working conditions
- Balance individual and collective practice
- Provide comprehensive and differentiated supports to teachers
- Provide opportunities for new roles for teachers
- Invite and reward collaboration
- Provide effective incentives for outreach to families and communities
- Insist on comprehensive assessments related to improved instruction

We present the recommendations in this article as starting points for the next stretch of the school reform pathway. The trail behind us is littered with reform manifestos that promote piecemeal approaches to improving the skills and practices of individual teachers. They have done little to move us closer to a place where non-White, non-native English speaking, and low-income students are showing consistently improved performance. Our journey must take us to that place by leading to the development of a sustainable collaborative culture in schools, growing out of and supported by systematic support for collective practice. More and more, we see compelling evidence that these cultures will result in more effective teaching, which will be a significant milestone on the longer path to educational equity.

In our convenings and in this issue of *VUE*, we have highlighted the collaborative cultures that can nurture critical capacities to improve teaching. Reaching equity will also require all those with a stake in public education to expand our vision and extend our focus – and recognize that the journey itself is a collective one.

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