

Beyond the Individual Teacher: How Collective Practice Leads to Higher Teaching Quality

Marla Ucelli-Kashyap

A *Nation at Risk* opened a deluge of commentary on the shortcomings of American public schools – and a new era of school reform. But it took several years before attention began turning to solutions that addressed teacher quality. In 1986, the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession advocated for more competitive teachers' compensation and career opportunities, stronger educational preparation, and higher standards. Ten years later, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF), created by the Rockefeller Foundation and Carnegie Corporation, echoed these themes and added a recommendation to “create schools that are organized for student and teacher success” through resource reallocation, supports for team efforts, and linking teacher learning to school improvement. They argued that policy-makers had to address *all* these areas: “Pulling on a single thread” would “create a tangle rather than tangible progress” (p. vii).

Today, it seems like a new study, policy report, government program, or philanthropic initiative about teachers and teaching appears every week. This attention to the heart of our public education system is welcome. But while some progress has been made, the issues raised by the Carnegie task force and NCTAF's concern about piecemeal versus systemic progress are as relevant now as they were in 1996 – if not more so.

Recently, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform and Kronley & Associates, in partnership with the Ford Foundation, gathered a diverse group of stakeholders in four convenings to explore how to

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achieve and maintain teaching quality in hard-to-staff schools. We called it “teaching” rather than “teacher” quality, to keep our focus less on the *individuals* and more on the *outcomes* of their work – the connection between good teaching and improved student learning. The final article of this issue describes some of the learning from that exploration. A recurring theme emerged: the importance of viewing teaching not just as an individual act, but as a collective and connected activity within and beyond school walls.

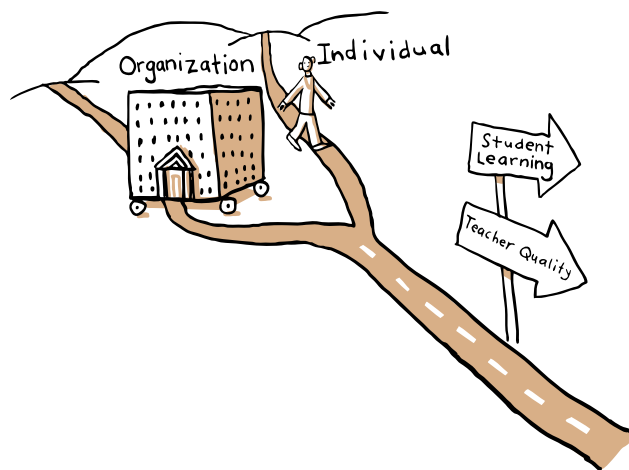
Previous issues of *VUE* have featured the voices of teachers and viewpoints on the factors affecting their work. This issue looks at an underexplored area of teaching quality – collective practice – from a variety of perspectives.

- Susan Moore Johnson looks at recent evidence on the role of teacher quality and finds that schools as organizations are key to developing teachers’ professional capacity and increasing student learning.
- Carrie Leana discusses the impact of social capital on both teaching quality and school improvement and what that means for schools and districts.
- Jonathan Eckert describes how his personal experience as a teacher in an unresponsive setting led him to a differentiated system for teaching effectiveness that combines individual and collective approaches to evaluation, compensation, professional development, and support.
- Milbrey McLaughlin and Joan Talbert discuss characteristics of effective professional learning communities, provide examples from a growing evidence base, and consider the challenges – and threats – to building capacity for PLCs at scale in districts.

- Christine Wiltshire, Frances Gallo, and Kath Connolly examine collective practice from the unique vantage point of a district school/charter school collaboration that is improving reading skills of young children in Central Falls, Rhode Island.
- Robert Kronley and I consider the need to broaden the prevailing policy focus beyond teaching as an isolated act, and the opportunities that change presents for districts, policy-makers, and partners seeking to build school and system instructional capacity.

The authors are not arguing for what Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley (2009) called “contrived collegiality” (p. 92). And they express different views on issues like the benefits of district supports, the value of expert coaching, and the appropriate role of individual incentives – witness Eckert’s and Talbert’s very different reactions to Kim Marshall’s 2009 *Education Week* commentary on merit pay.

There is a lot at stake in these discussions. During 2010, hundreds of millions of federal dollars in stimulus funding will be awarded to states and districts based partly on a requirement for high-quality teachers – defined, in large measure, by the test scores of their students. This issue’s contributors may disagree on some things, but they all share a sense that prevailing conceptions and measures of quality



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teaching are too narrow. They also share a concern that without attention to school-level conditions and contexts, accountable and focused collegial relationships, and more supports for collective capacity building, victories in improving teaching and learning will be limited and short-lived.

These concepts have been part of the bedrock of the Annenberg Institute's thinking since its inception in 1993. Our current framework of "smart education systems" – a network of partnerships that provides a comprehensive system of supports and opportunities for student learning across an entire district and community – includes a focus on collective leadership, capacity building, and strong relationships. In the words of the late Ted Sizer, founding director of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, to whom this issue is dedicated, "Improving American secondary education absolutely depends on improving the conditions of work and the respect for teachers. No new technology, training scheme, licensure revision, or new curriculum will suffice" (1984, p. 180).

Over the years to come, will the current high-decibel focus on teacher quality only yield noise, or will it lead to measurable progress in closing learning gaps, especially in the hardest-to-staff and hardest-to-improve schools? That depends on what we do today. The following articles offer some ideas and hope for moving the needle in the right direction.