**Teaching As a Team Sport- white\_ecs@fuse.net**

When historians get around to listing the most astonishing discoveries about student achievement, there are two findings that won’t make their list:

1. An effective teacher has more impact on student achievement than all other factors combined.

2. When teachers get together to talk in concrete, precise language about instruction and student work, their teaching dramatically improves and student achievement rises (Schmoker 2006).

Sadly, what might make our historians’ list of astonishing discoveries is that we knew it was all about teaching and collaboration, yet we rarely collaborated in our schools.

The irony isn’t troubling; it’s frightening! We value teaching our students to work together and to learn from one another, but we don’t model this behavior for them. We sing the praises of *two heads being better than one*, while we ignore the expertise of our colleagues and field experts. We expect teachers to hone their skills while incarcerated in a cafeteria for eight hours of mandatory, districtwide professional development. Aside from such events, it is the norm for teachers to work in isolation like independent contractors, sharing only the refrigerator and the parking lot. Each classroom is its own “microcosm.”

What makes these teams so powerful and empowering? It’s this simple fact: You do not become an extraordinary teacher alone. But—don’t get nervous—the journey is less about attaining perfection and probably more about being a better teacher today than you were yesterday, about acknowledging imperfection and looking for competency and complementaries among your colleagues. PLCs and data teams “allow you to magnify your strengths and work with other teachers who provide different but equally important strengths. Therefore, the math teacher who is a ninja at number sense may not be an expert on geometry. But the teacher across the hall cannot wait to share her engaging activity for scalene and isosceles triangles. While no single person will possess every dimension of an extraordinary teacher, the team is more likely to have all of them. And when teachers come together and talk about teaching, they realize that improvement is something they can generate, rather than something that is Power-Pointed out to them by so-called experts.

**Data Teams Are Not . . .**

Sometimes schools think that they have PLCs or data teams, but they don’t. They’ll get together and talk about assemblies, field trips, lunch duty, and various “housekeeping” issues. These topics are important, but remember—real teacher work has to focus on what’s being taught, its relationship to standards, how students are learning and behaving, and what needs to be done to get all students to improve. Effective PLCs and data teams are groups of teachers who believe that they are collectively responsible for student success.

We recently spent two days working with a group of teachers on data analysis. That evening, logging on to our computer, we saw the following message:

Hello,

My name is Lisa. I was in your class on Thursday, and I understood you to say that you often helped schools develop plans to help them improve student achievement and student behavior. I would like your opinion on professional learning communities. Our school is not showing growth and our data team has gone from being a book club to an opportunity to share meatloaf recipes.

Sincerely,

Lisa C.

While reading and discussing a book might be a good starting point for some teams, it should never be viewed as the culminating event! What, if instead of just reading a book, teachers collectively determined how to apply what they read to benefit students? We cannot imagine anything more frustrating than reading about bold changes in the way we might work and then not doing something about the way we work.

Data teams are not recipe or book clubs, and they’re not code for forms, flow charts, and spreadsheets. Sometimes developing and filling in these tools will occupy teachers for meeting, after meeting, after meeting. Taken to extremes, these activities can be a massive exercise in missing the point.

Forms are simply a way to structure the conversation so that all members participate, stay focused, and comply with group norms. Agendas that set time limits and topic boundaries can be especially helpful with hard-to-discuss topics by providing structure and psychological safety. They also can come in handy if one or two members monopolize the discussion or elbow others out of the discussion. Forms and agendas may help teachers spell out ground rules and expectations for their work, including how consensus is defined, how conflicts will be resolved, and how time will be spent. But they are not the real work, and if forms get in the way, change them or get rid of them!

**How to Implement Data Team Techniques**

Developing a data team, or at least a data team attitude, takes work and intentionality. It’s unrealistic to think that you can flip your school to data team thinking overnight. Instead, take small steps that can start paving the way for active collaboration between teachers. The goal is to “get every brain in the game”.

* Approach teachers whose skills you respect, and ask them to observe your teaching and offer some suggestions on your methods. This takes courage!
* Ask to sit in on the class of another teacher. Say something as simple as, “I always hear students leaving your class still discussing what you taught. I’d love to see how you get that level of engagement. Do you mind if I sit in on one of your classes to observe?” Or, “I noticed your students mastered this week’s indicator. What are you doing?”
* Don’t think that because you are the “rookie” you have nothing to contribute. The flow of information doesn’t always go from experienced teacher to new teacher. Just as you value the child in your class who asks pertinent questions, your questions are essential to the growth of yourself and your colleagues. Your questions encourage more experienced teachers to consider practices and the basis for them. You are also likely to hold the most current knowledge of cutting-edge educational research that can and should be discussed.
* If you and your colleagues are initially reluctant to talk about student achievement, common assessments, and lessons, you may find it safer to discuss and collaborate on student behavioral issues like reducing the number of office referrals or the number of bus incidents. So start there!
* If you are considering starting or reviving a data team in your school, remember—simple plans work best. The table below provides modest suggestions for activities in which your data team could engage.

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Suggestions for Data Team Activities

**What you might do: Why you would do these things:**

Collaboratively score student work Develop common understandings of the

Analyze student data on a standard indicator

Identify lessons for remediation or enrichment Pre-testing to plan instruction

Adjust lessons Establish a common rigor

Share lessons Select exemplars to share

Inform consistent grading procedures