



# Collective Practice Quality Teaching

**How Best to Add Value? Strike a Balance between the Individual and the Organization in School Reform**

*Susan Moore Johnson*

**Social Capital: The Collective Component of Teaching Quality**

*Carrie M. Leana*

**Compensation and Collaboration: A Comprehensive Approach to Improving Teaching Effectiveness**

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**Professional Learning Communities: Building Blocks for School Culture and Student Learning**

*Milbrey W. McLaughlin and Joan E. Talbert*

**A Pioneering Collaboration to Improve Reading in Central Falls**

*Christine Wiltshire, Frances Gallo, and Kath Connolly*

**Collective Practice: Strategies for Sustainable Improvement**

*Robert A. Kronley and Marla Ucelli-Kashyap*

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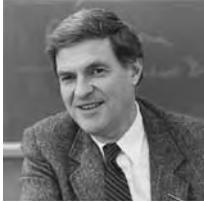
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Theodore R. Sizer

1932–2009

This issue of *Voices in Urban Education*  
is dedicated with gratitude to  
the founding director of  
The Annenberg Institute for School Reform  
at Brown University

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

Marla Ucelli-Kashyap

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**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.

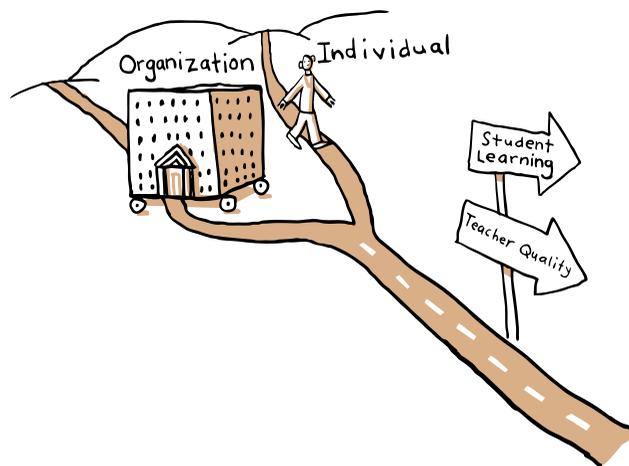
Previous issues of *VUE* have featured the voices of teachers and viewpoints on the factors affecting their work. This issue looks at an underexplored area of teaching quality – collective practice – from a variety of perspectives.

- 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 “con-trived 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.

# How Best to Add Value? Strike a Balance between the Individual and the Organization in School Reform

Susan Moore Johnson

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*In the push to recruit and reward the most talented individual teachers, many policy-makers and administrators have overlooked the crucial role of the school as an organization in enhancing teaching quality.*

*This article is reprinted with permission from EPI briefing paper #249, published by the Economic Policy Institute, Washington, D.C., on October 23, 2009.*

Two developments in public education converged near the turn of the century to bring rare prominence to the issue of teacher policy. First, several researchers reported with confidence that teachers are the single most important school-level factor in students' learning. Although schools could not influence the prior experience or socio-economic status of a student, they could decide who the child's teachers would be, and those decisions would have long-term consequences for students' academic success. Meanwhile, school officials faced the challenge of replacing an enormous cohort of retiring veterans with new teachers. The demand for teachers in low-income schools was especially great.

Recognizing this pressing need for new, effective teachers, policy-makers and administrators began to adopt strategies for recruiting, hiring, supporting, motivating, assessing, and compensating the best possible individuals. Their efforts succeeded in highlighting for the public the importance of teachers. Over the past decade, however, this sharpened focus on the individual teacher has eclipsed the role that the school *as an organization* can and must

play in enhancing the quality and effectiveness of teachers and teaching. As a result, teachers are getting less support than they should and schools are less successful than they might be.

The following discussion explores this line of argument by first summarizing relevant evidence and then suggesting how schools can increase their professional capacity and instructional success by striking a balance between the attention they give to the individual teacher and the attention they devote to the organization overall.

## ***Findings on the Role of Teacher Quality***

Between 1997 and 2003, the importance of the teacher's role in student learning was confirmed by a series of influential studies (Wright, Horn & Sanders 1997; Rockoff 2004; Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain 2005; Rowan, Correnti & Miller 2002; McCaffrey et al. 2003). Together, these studies demonstrated that the teacher is the most important school-level influence on students' learning, that some

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teachers are much more effective than others in raising student achievement, and that differences among teachers can be measured using methods called value-added modeling. Further, these studies revealed that relative quality among teachers within schools varies greatly. This finding suggested to some analysts that the school as an organization has little influence on teachers' effectiveness and, therefore, that the most sensible strategy for improving teaching would be to staff schools with the best possible teaching candidates.

These findings about teacher quality were reported widely and analyzed closely (see, for example, Archer 1999; Olson 2004). Coupled with dramatic changes in the teacher labor market at the time, the findings led officials in many states to rewrite teacher licensing requirements while local school boards and administrators adopted new approaches for staffing their schools.

### ***Rising Demand, Falling Supply in the Teacher Labor Market***

By 2000, an enormous cohort of teachers who had been hired during the late 1960s and early 1970s were beginning to retire, and it was not clear who would replace them. Three decades before, teaching had provided a professional path for women and for men of color when other lines of work were closed to them. Now these groups, who had long made up the ranks of teachers, had access to a wide range of attractive career options; they no longer would enter teaching as a default career. The demand for new teachers grew, but the pool of licensed candidates was small and, by some accounts, weak (Corcoran, Evans & Schwab 2004). For the first time in history, schools had to compete for talent, and they were unprepared to do so.

Given the new convincing research that a single teacher could dramatically affect a child's life chances, school officials recognized more than ever the importance of recruiting and hiring promising candidates. But who was most likely to become an effective teacher? Research offered policy-makers and administrators little guidance, beyond suggesting that individuals with higher test scores and greater content knowledge were more likely to be effective in raising students' test scores. There was no clear evidence that pre-service training in pedagogy or holding of a master's degree (other than in mathematics) contributed to a teacher's instructional success. The lack of conclusive research findings about teacher qualifications, coupled with a widely held belief that an individual who masters content knowledge can teach, led policy-makers in many states to substantially reduce entry requirements to teaching.

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Unless all teachers within a school are highly effective, some students benefit from good instruction, while others are penalized for having been assigned to the “wrong” teacher.

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Meanwhile, Teach for America (TFA), a program placing high-achieving liberal arts graduates in low-income schools, grew steadily in size and influence. TFA intensively recruited strong candidates on prestigious campuses and then carefully chose their corps members through a rigorous selection process. Publicity about TFA and similar programs reinforced the view that schools could be reformed solely by hiring individuals with “the right stuff.” TFA corps members, assigned to some of the nation’s most challenging schools, were expected to succeed largely by virtue of their own personal knowledge and intense dedication to students. They were asked to surmount the obstacles of the schools where they worked, rather than relying on those schools to support their work. Publicity about these teachers’ courage and commitment heightened beliefs that the right individual could single-handedly succeed with any students.

### ***Competing Theories of Change***

This strategy for improving public education by relying on carefully chosen individuals is consistent with what is often referred to as the “egg-crate” model of schooling. Each teacher instructs his or her own students in a separate classroom and, although classrooms are connected, they remain discrete. The school’s effectiveness is simply the aggregate of these individual teachers’ contributions to students’ learning. This approach depends largely on self-reliant individuals and solo performances. However, unless all

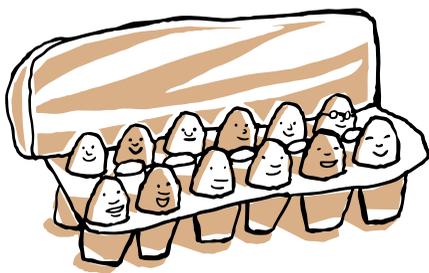


teachers within a school are highly effective, some students benefit from good instruction, while others are penalized for having been assigned to the “wrong” teacher. Moreover, although teachers may succeed within the walls of a single classroom, a student’s academic career extends throughout the school from class to class and grade to grade. The egg-crate model does nothing to ensure that a student’s experience over time will be consistent, coherent, or successful.

By contrast, an organizational approach to school improvement rests on a deliberately interdependent school organization. Teachers work across classroom and grade-level boundaries to support and extend each other’s efforts. Arguably, the more that a school’s teachers are knowledgeable about all students and coordinate their efforts to meet those students’ needs, the more effective the school will be. This collaborative work among teachers with different levels of skill and different

types of experience is designed to capitalize on the strengths of some and compensate for the weaknesses of others, thus increasing the overall professional capacity of the school.

An egg-crate school with independent teachers is administratively convenient because the loss of a teacher in one classroom has little practical consequence for teachers in other classrooms. Even though new, promising teachers may stay only for two or three years, proponents argue that those teachers' contributions to student learning are worth the investment. However, teacher turnover has substantial costs. The Boston Public Schools documented that in 2003 it cost the district \$10,547 to replace a



first-year teacher, \$18,617 to replace a second-year teacher, and \$26,687 to replace a third-year teacher on top of the teacher's salary (Birkeland & Curtis 2006). More important, however, is the organizational cost of turnover, for the steady loss of able teachers continuously erodes the instructional capacity of schools.

A school where teachers work collaboratively certainly is more challenging to develop than one based simply on individuals. Teachers' roles are differentiated and their responsibilities and relationships are interdependent.

Such a school can monitor the progress of individual students over time, thus increasing the prospects for instructional success. Collaborative work can benefit from the combined talents and skills of all teachers, thus reducing the classroom-to-classroom variation in student achievement.

### ***The Weight of the Evidence***

Although studies have shown that certain teachers are more effective than others, research has yet to explain what it is that effective teachers do to raise student achievement. Proponents of the teacher-focused model assert that staffing high-need schools with smart, accomplished, and committed individuals can close the academic achievement gap, yet there is scant evidence that this actually occurs. For example, in its random-assignment study of TFA elementary teachers' effectiveness, researchers from Mathematica found the TFA teachers to be only modestly better (one month more achievement in mathematics and no better performance in reading) than the comparison group of teachers (Decker, Mayer & Glazerman 2004). This slight difference was despite the fact that only some in the comparison group had traditional preparation, while others worked under an emergency license. Given the prior academic accomplishments of TFA teachers and the careful selection process, one might expect to find clear evidence of superior performance. However, it may well be that able and committed individuals cannot, on their own, overcome the challenges of weak and dysfunctional school organizations. Put another way, if the school were

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Research suggests that exclusively attending to the individual's qualifications and accomplishments is a mistake and should be balanced with attention to the school organization in which that teacher will work.

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organized to draw upon and extend the talents and experiences of all its teachers, TFA teachers might in fact be shown to be more effective.

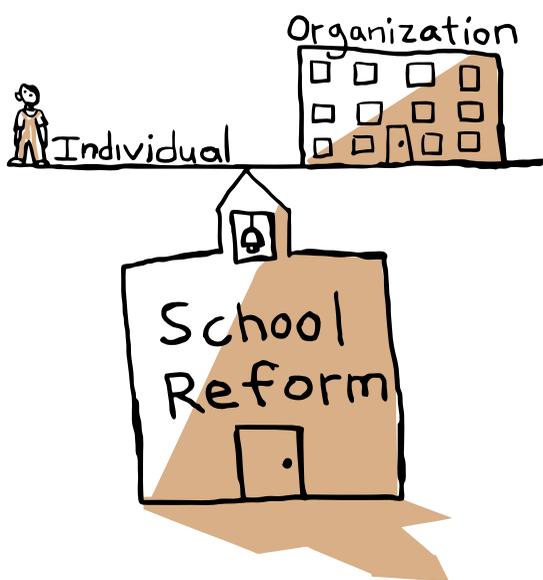
Meanwhile, since the 1990s research studies have steadily documented the benefits and potential of an organizational strategy for school improvement (for example, Louis, Marks & Kruse 1996; Newmann et al. 2001). In 1999, Abelman and Elmore found that schools could not respond productively to external accountability policies unless they already had established professional norms and practices that ensured internal instructional coherence. Subsequently, Bryk and Schneider (2002) found that organizational trust was central to improved student learning. In study after study, researchers have concluded that schools do not become more effective unless teachers coordinate their work and contribute to schoolwide improvement.

But the benefits of such a coordinated effort are precluded by an approach to human capital that depends primarily on the abilities and actions of individuals working within their solitary classrooms.

### ***Alternative Approaches to Human Capital Management***

In developing its human capital strategy, a district establishes approaches for teachers' recruitment, hiring, induction, professional development, evaluation, and compensation. As a group, these approaches might be geared to the individual, to the school organization, or to both. Certainly, the characteristics of individual teachers matter and must be taken into account at all stages of the teacher's career. A principal intent on hiring a strong science teacher would be foolish to ignore the candidate's transcript. However, research suggests that exclusively attending to the individual's qualifications and accomplishments is a mistake and should be balanced with attention to the school organization in which that teacher will work.

Various research studies that we have conducted since 2000 at the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers conclude that new teachers are more likely to remain in their schools and to report greater satisfaction with teaching when they experience school-based approaches to hiring, induction, and professional improvement (Johnson et al. 2004; also see <[www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt](http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ngt)>). For



example, hiring practices that involve current teachers in selecting their new colleagues were found to give new teachers a better preview of how their school would function. A better preview of work responsibilities has been shown to be associated with greater satisfaction and retention (Liu 2005). Novice teachers who were actively engaged in an ongoing way with their veteran colleagues during the first years of induction reported more satisfaction with teaching and a greater sense of self-efficacy than did those who were isolated as individuals or segregated with other novices. Over two years, novice teachers who worked in a school with an “integrated professional culture” and worked in an interdependent fashion with more experienced teachers had higher retention rates than those who did not (Kardos et al. 2001; Johnson et al. 2004).

Other researchers report similar findings about the importance of organizational context in the induction of new teachers. For example, Mathematica conducted a random-assignment study of intensive one-to-one mentoring, a popular approach that focuses resources on the individual teacher. After two years, researchers concluded that the approach had no greater effect on retention or student learning than routine induction (Isenberg et al. 2009). Kapadia, Coca, and Easton (2007), who did find positive effects of one-to-one mentoring on the retention of Chicago teachers, reported that the benefits were substantially enhanced when mentoring was embedded in the professional context of the school. With both hiring and induction, therefore, new teachers seem to benefit not only when they are taken into account as individuals but also when they actively engage with their peers in the school.

## ***Striking a Balance between the Individual and the Organization***

In part, the increasing focus on the individual teacher as the key to improving public schools has been driven by new value-added research methods, which promise to identify each teacher's contribution to student growth. By contrast, investigations of the school organization in all its complexity do not lend themselves to random-assignment studies, causal findings, or stark conclusions. However, the recent line of qualitative and survey-based research about teachers' work that is discussed above confirms the importance of the school organization in supporting teachers' growth, developing professional capacity, and increasing student learning. It is important, therefore, for researchers and policy-makers to better understand and develop the relationship between the individual teacher and the school organization in which he or she works.

Two recent, unpublished studies suggest that researchers may be moving in that direction. A brief summary of each offers a glimpse into how research about the individual and the organization might intersect and inform one another, thus making the way for new progress in understanding and promoting both teacher quality and student learning.

The first study, by Tyler et al. (2009), focuses on the relationship between teacher evaluation and student test scores. Some policy analysts have proposed using value-added research methods to decide whether, based on their students' test scores, teachers deserve to become tenured. Critics

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Evaluations based on observations can help teachers understand what they can do in order to improve, while value-added scores provide no such guidance. However, classroom observations by principals are known to be uneven at best.

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of this approach say that classroom observations yield a much more valid assessment of teaching practice than test scores. Moreover, evaluations based on observations can help teachers understand what they can do in order to improve, while value-added scores provide no such guidance. However, classroom observations by principals are known to be uneven at best (New Teacher Project 2009). Over the past ten years, the Cincinnati Public Schools have developed a standards-based Teacher Evaluation System (TES) in which trained master teachers assess other teachers' performance. Throughout the district, teachers and administrators have received training about the TES standards and their use in teaching and evaluation. A draft working paper by Tyler et al. (2009) indicates that Cincinnati teachers' value-added scores and their TES assessments are related in substantial ways. This is notable because it suggests not only that the value-added and observation measures are aligned, but also that combining the approaches may be worthwhile.

While value-added measures may tell teachers *how well* they are doing, TES can tell them *why*, and provide the information and professional guidance they seek about where they fall short and how they might improve.

The second new study, by economists Jackson and Bruegmann (2009), focuses on collaboration among teachers. One important strategy for increasing the professional capacity of schools is to develop networks of information and exchange among teachers. Many districts provide time for elementary school teachers to work collaboratively on grade-level teams, and this teaming, which runs counter to traditional norms of individualism and autonomy among teachers, has been studied using qualitative methods, such as observations and interviews. Participants often report that undertaking such collaboration is difficult, but valuable. However, school officials may question whether this large investment of teachers' time actually pays off. Jackson and Bruegmann find that students have larger achievement gains in math and reading, both initially and over time, when their teacher works with more effective colleagues at the same grade level. The researchers found the effects of "peer-induced learning" to be especially strong for less-experienced teachers. These findings about improved teaching and increased student learning in the context of collaborative structures provide important information as policy-makers weigh alternative approaches to improving teacher quality.

## **Conclusion**

Improving student learning, especially in high-need, low-income schools, requires increasing the professional capacity of schools. This is an organizational challenge that calls for a well-designed organizational response. Staffing weak and dysfunctional schools with a steady stream of talented and motivated individuals may serve some students in the short run, but it will not strengthen their schools in the long run. Recognizing that reality, however, does not mean that policy-makers or administrators should ignore the potential of individuals or fail to hold them to account for their performance. Rather, it means that we must come to better understand the experiences of individuals within schools and the potential of those schools to support and enhance the work of the teachers who staff them. With better evidence and insight, we can design and adopt policies and practices that promote teacher quality and serve students as they should be served.

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# Social Capital: The Collective Component of Teaching Quality

Carrie M. Leana

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*The importance of social capital in teaching quality is often ignored in current discussions of human capital in education.*

**H**uman capital – the skills and knowledge of individual teachers – has been a hot topic in recent debates about education reform. But the importance of *social* capital – the interactions among teachers in a school – is often overlooked in discussions of instructional quality. Research suggests that social capital thrives in an atmosphere of mutual trust and collective practice – and that it is a powerful predictor of student achievement.

Carrie Leana, a professor of organizational behavior and management at the University of Pittsburgh, has done significant research in public schools. She spoke to *VUE* guest editor Marla Ucelli-Kashyap about her perspectives and research on human and social capital in the education sector.

*Let's start by comparing human capital and the attention it gets in education to the corporate sector or health care or other kinds of organizations you study.*

Education is the quintessential knowledge industry, and teachers are the quintessential knowledge workers. So when we talk about human capital – the ability, education, and training that people bring to a job – it's at least as important in education as it is in other industries.

And I don't think human capital gets short shrift in education. My own view is that it is over-emphasized in education, as opposed to industry. I think there is far too much focus on teacher certification, advanced educational degrees, measuring teacher

competence, and those kinds of things. It is hard to think of an industry where there is more ongoing professional development. I think human capital actually gets quite a bit of attention – arguably *too* much – and there is quite a bit of public policy action around things like mandated certification and mandated accreditation of teachers. The problem is that most of these approaches are unsuccessful.

## ***The Relationship between Social Capital and Human Capital***

*What is social capital and how do you distinguish it from human capital?*

What are those things that kids play with that have circles and you put the rods into them? TinkerToys! In TinkerToys you have two basic parts.

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First there are these nodes, which are the circles; we can use these to represent *human capital*. Then you have those rods or spokes that plug into the circle pieces and connect one node to another. Those connecting rods are the *social capital*.

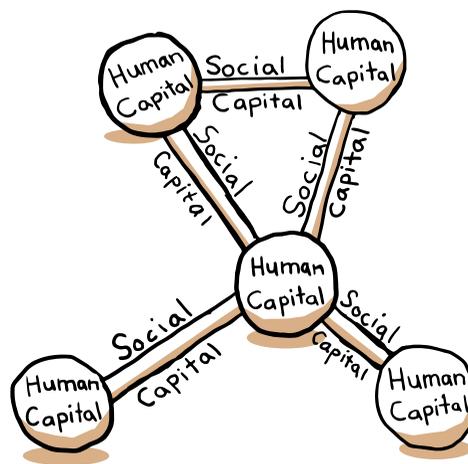
And the reason I am using this TinkerToy analogy is that human capital, in and of itself, is not going to be a very effective building block for a school, much less a school system – just as you can't build much of a foundation in TinkerToys if you only use the circle pieces. Instead, to build a sustainable school or system, you have to also have the *connectors* between the nodes – the social capital.

Human capital by itself may help in a particular classroom, but it is not going to make a good school. Rather, a focus on human capital alone almost invariably results in the kind of school where you have to worry about which teacher a student gets. To me, it's always the sign of a bad school when there are, say, five fourth-grade teachers and you are hoping that you get Miss Monroe. There is something wrong with that system if Miss Monroe is the only good fourth-grade teacher. So, I think that human capital itself can have a contained beneficial effect in one classroom. But you are not going to change a school or system that way. Instead, you have to focus on the connections, too.

Another way to understand the distinction between human capital and social capital is to ask the question, "Why are some schools better than others?" A human capital answer would say that some schools are better because

they have the best-trained teachers. A social capital answer would say there is something about the way those teachers are interacting that influences the school as a whole and results in a level of shared performance that you can't get from individuals alone.

If you only have human capital without social capital, you have these good, smart teachers who come in and just work by themselves. The knowledge is very concentrated and people aren't able to learn from one



another in terms of becoming better at their work. Instead, all learning is individual trial and error, or book learning, or learning from experts. But it is not a group learning process. It is an individual learning process. Conversely, if you have lots of social capital in a school with no human capital, you get lots of information exchange, because everyone talks to everyone else. But the problem is that nobody knows anything, so the information that's exchanged isn't very helpful in terms of teachers getting better at their work. If we are all really bad at teaching math, we are not going to get any better at it by talking to one another a lot.

And if we have a situation where we have low human capital and low social capital – which, unfortunately, happens a lot in hard-to-staff schools – you don’t really have much knowledge to begin with and you have no capacity to enhance it. The ideal situation, of course, is a high-learning environment where you have both human capital and social capital. Then you’ve got teachers who know what they’re doing – at least, a critical mass of them – and you’ve got lots of information exchange among teachers around the actual subject and practice of teaching.



### ***The Impact of Social Capital on Teaching Quality and Student Achievement***

*What are some of the key findings from your studies of social capital in school settings?*

We have done lots of different studies [Pil & Leana 2006; Shevchuk, Leana & Mittal 2008]. For our first study in a public school system we wanted to be modest [laughs] and study all the schools in the district. We wanted our findings to apply to high schools, grade schools, you name it – we studied more

than 90 percent of the schools in the district. What we learned about social capital was that it entailed having a trusting climate in the school – one where teachers talked to each other, shared the same norms, and had strong agreement in their descriptions of the culture of the school. That trusting climate was more important than teacher level of education, teacher certification, or other human capital measures in predicting student achievement scores. We frankly didn’t expect social capital to be as powerful as it was, and our findings led us to further explore why.

The second big study was in New York, where we studied all the elementary schools – over 200 – in four subdistricts in the New York City school system. In addition to the usual measures on education and certification, we assessed how well teachers taught math and how competent they felt teaching specific topics like fractions, division, and ratios. So those were our human capital measures, which we felt really captured an array of teacher knowledge, skills, and experiences. With our social capital measures, we asked teachers to report on the overall climate of the school, as we did in our earlier study. But we also asked them to report on who they talked to when they had questions or problems around particular subjects – literacy and math, in this case. So, if I’m a teacher and I have a kid in my class and he’s not getting it but I don’t understand why, or if I have a topic – fractions – and I don’t really know how to teach fractions, then where do I go to try to get that information? Who do I ask to help me solve day-to-day problems? We asked teachers to tell us who they go to, how often they talk to these others, and how close

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## A trusting climate was more important than teacher level of education, teacher certification, or other human capital measures in predicting student achievement scores.

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they felt to these others from whom they sought advice.

By two to one, when you ask teachers who they talk to when they have a problem or content question, they report that they talk to another teacher. They don't talk to experts. They don't talk to the coaches. They don't talk to the principal. They don't talk to the assistant principal. They don't talk to the professional development consultants. They talk to one another. So, if I don't know how to teach fractions, I am going to ask you, my peer, to help me. I am not going to ask the experts, or coaches, or principals. And again, this probably goes to the lack of trust in many school environments.

At the same time, this is where human capital becomes important, too, because if you, my trusted peer, don't know anything about teaching fractions either, I am not going to get any better at teaching fractions myself. I might actually get worse by following your advice! So our research shows that human capital and social capital are inextricably intertwined. If you are going to have a good school, not just

a good classroom, you must have both human and social capital, and one cannot substitute for the other.

*Were there differences in the importance of social capital by grade level or subject?*

We couldn't answer that question entirely in our second study because our research design required participating teachers to cover a variety of subject areas, which meant elementary school teachers. In the first study, though, we included high school, middle school, and elementary school teachers, and their patterns were essentially the same. There was some variation, but it was not as great as we expected and it was not significant. Social capital was a significant predictor of school success across all types of schools and grade levels.

### ***Social Capital and Teacher Performance***

*You've studied a rather large population of teachers and concluded that social capital is at least as important as human capital. What are the implications of that?*

To me, the implications can be separated into a basic level and then a more advanced level. The basics are, I think, just good management about the factors that go into performance. Here



we are talking about performance in a very complex job: classroom teaching. When I talk to business executives about how to most effectively manage performance issues, I use an oversimplification – but a useful one – to think about broad categories or “buckets” of potential issues. One big bucket holds all the issues around teacher ability, and the second big bucket contains issues regarding work motivation.

### **Ability**

When you think about what’s in the ability bucket, particularly with the labor structure in public schools, managing is not so much about selecting the right teachers, because there just aren’t many school districts that are hiring like mad. Instead, a lot of the ability questions have more to do with resource allocation decisions among existing teaching staff.

How do you provide teachers with the resources so that they are able to do their jobs well? Those resources include time, which I think is incredibly important. If you don’t have fifteen extra minutes in your day, you are never going to learn anything about teaching math from your peers. You have to

have the time, and that time has to be set aside for this purpose. I think there is also a lot to be said for (and I’ll get criticized by the economists for this) having some slack in the system and living with a certain amount of inefficiency in schools. When you think about public schools, particularly in the under-resourced areas and the hard-to-staff schools, there is no slack. Resources are stretched to the breaking point and teachers are overwhelmed with their responsibilities, both in and outside the classroom. Principals tend to manage by close monitoring and short-term incentives. In such an environment, social capital is very difficult to build and nearly impossible to sustain over time.

I have to tell you that if I were a teacher in that [type of] system, then I would be just as leery of administrators – and maybe even rebellious against their latest schemes. In many of these overburdened schools, administrators try to cope with performance problems by de-professionalizing the teaching

staff. Essentially, they decide not to trust teachers to do their jobs. And to deal with that lack of trust, administrators try to script the practice of teaching as much as they can. In some popular curricula, everything the kids do is scripted; everything the teachers do is scripted. It is basically turning teaching into factory work. And if teachers, in turn, begin to act like factory workers, we shouldn't be surprised. It seems to me we are missing a tremendous opportunity to work with the teachers unions on building social capital in schools – something that can be beneficial to teachers, children, and school administrators. Instead, we are always talking about efficiency when we really ought to be talking about effectiveness. Because over the long term, despite all our schemes regarding curriculum “improvements” and teacher “development,” we haven't gotten much better at improving the ability of teachers to do their jobs well.

### **Motivation**

In the second bucket is the motivation issue, which essentially entails providing rewards and incentives for teachers. One thing that I think is a very bad idea is individual incentives for teachers in public schools. I think these should be replaced with group-level incentives. The idea of rewarding an individual teacher for individual student performance levels doesn't make a lot of sense to me. What we should be trying to do in public schools is not just improve Mrs. Smith's third-grade class. Instead, what we should be thinking about is improving the school as a whole so that when Johnny moves to fourth grade he will again have a good teacher – one who can build on all the hard work that Mrs. Smith has already put in.

So here's a radical idea: Let's get rid of the “teacher of the year” award!

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Despite all our schemes regarding curriculum “improvements” and teacher “development,” we haven't gotten much better at improving the ability of teachers to do their jobs well.

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This is an individual incentive where we select one and only one teacher who will be honored as superior to all others. It just strikes me as so anti-social capital and serves to foster competitive, rather than cooperative behavior. For a lot of teachers who are very good at their jobs the only extrinsic reward they get is being singled out as the “best” teacher in the school. Such a system is perverse in that it discourages the best teacher from helping others because doing so only jeopardizes her own status if all the other teachers become as good as she is. All I can say is, look at the evidence: singling out all these “best” teachers in the school, the district,

the state, the country, year in and year out, hasn’t improved public education very much. So I think it’s high time to try a different approach to incentives. And our data clearly argue for an emphasis on social capital rather than individual human capital.

### **Linking Teacher Incentives and Student Learning: Principles of Change**

*If social capital is so important, how do you build it and who can help build it?*

Pretend there is a blackboard where we’ve written “teacher incentives” way on the left-hand side and “student learning” way on the right-hand side. That seems to be the current thinking of economists, who are primarily focused on designing elegant incentive models for teachers, and educators, who are focused primarily on designing nuanced student assessment systems. But what’s missing is the tremendous amount of black space in the middle of the board. And you really need to go into that “black box” of process if you are going to create effective strategies for change.

These strategies are not going to be cookie cutter; they can’t be. But you can have generalized principles for change, and they can be replicated across school settings. And we know from our research that these principles must include social capital as well as human capital. And fundamental to social capital is a shared feeling among teachers that each of them is going to do more than they have to do, because each knows they can count on others to do more, too. They have a shared destiny and a shared purpose, so that each individual doesn’t have to get an immediate payoff every time he or she does a little extra for the school as a whole.

You can begin by asking schools and districts, teachers and parents, how they would build a culture of trust. What would that mean? What would that look like here? How would we do that in our context? These are the basic design principles for which schools and districts must be held accountable. Without them, I fear that the next round of school reforms will be no more successful than all the previous ones.

But I am hopeful. Our research makes me hopeful because it provides a clear direction for building and sustaining successful schools.

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# Compensation and Collaboration: A Comprehensive Approach to Improving Teaching Effectiveness

Jonathan Eckert

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*Developing effective teachers requires school-level structures that support and encourage both individual teacher quality and collective teaching quality for the whole school.*

Last year, I left teaching in the public school classroom after twelve years. Not wanting to go into administration, I did not have options to grow professionally, increase responsibilities, receive increased compensation, and continue teaching. Had I been in a system that truly recognized and rewarded teacher excellence, I might still be in the classroom, teaching seventh-grade students and growing with my colleagues.

My experiences are not unique; many other career educators have had similar frustrations. But better alternatives to traditional teacher human capital policies are now available. In this article, I will describe one of them.

After teaching in Illinois for eight years and Tennessee for four years and spending a year at the U.S. Department of Education, I learned that research, teacher intuition, and student intuition do not always align. However, on two foundational issues, they could not be more aligned: teachers matter, and teachers are not interchangeable parts or widgets. Repeatedly, studies have shown that the individual teacher in the classroom is the single greatest

school-based influence on student learning (Hanushek 1992; Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain 2005; Sanders & Rivers 1996). *The Widget Effect*, a report released by the New Teacher Project, affirmed what many teachers, researchers, and policy-makers already knew: we treat teachers as interchangeable parts, scoring them nearly identically on evaluations – even though we know different teachers add different knowledge, skills, and value to a given context (Weisberg et al. 2009).

Nearly all students or former students can point to teachers who positively impacted their learning and life trajectory. Conversely, nearly every student could identify the few teachers who should no longer be teaching or should never have entered the profession. These teachers have lost – or never had – the ability to connect with students in a way that results in positive student outcomes.

We need policy that is aligned with what research, teachers, and students tell us. We must align our education system to best serve the needs of all of our students. To do this, we need to create structures that support and encourage the development of effective teachers. Due to the unique skills, contexts, and

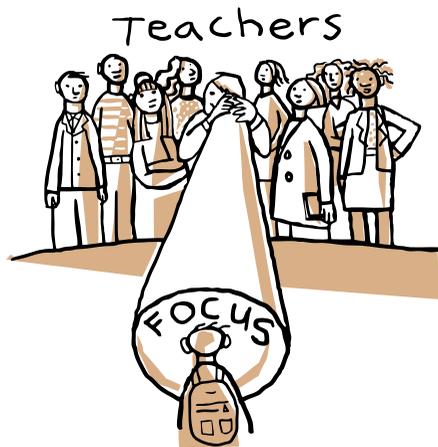
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needs of teachers, support cannot be at the “macro-teacher” level: the focus must be on the individual teacher.

### ***The Need for a Comprehensive, Differentiated Approach***

For too long, both in policy and practice, professional development, evaluation, and compensation have treated teachers as an amorphous entity and applied one-size-fits-all solutions. I experienced this as a middle school science teacher in Tennessee. My district’s central office determined that every teacher in the district needed three years of professional development on differentiated instruction. Ironically, the instruction on differentiated instruction was not differentiated in any way for readiness, expertise, knowledge, or even subjects taught by teachers. For example, middle school science teachers, gym teachers, band directors, and kindergarten teachers all sat in the same sessions. Not only was this ineffective, it also bred cynicism and disillusionment among teachers, who felt that central office administrators were failing to recognize the individual needs of teachers.

In my time at the U.S. Department of Education, I became aware of a comprehensive approach to improving schools based on the idea that effective teachers could be the catalysts for increasing student learning. Time and again, I returned to this model – TAP: The System for Teacher and Student Advancement – as an example of how systems could attain better results for their students. After my time at the Department of Education was over, I began working as a consultant to TAP. The system is designed to attract, retain,



and develop teachers and school leaders to increase the effectiveness of instruction and raise student achievement. The TAP system was developed by Lowell Milken and colleagues at the Milken Family Foundation and was first implemented in the 2000–2001 school year. It is now promoted and coordinated by the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET). Impacting more than 7,500 teachers and 85,000 students across the country, TAP engages schools by supporting teachers both in teams and as individuals.<sup>1</sup>

TAP aligns professional development, multiple measures of teaching effectiveness, compensation, and teacher advancement to support student learning. This alignment was especially

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<sup>1</sup> In the 2009–2010 school year, TAP was in operation in 227 schools in thirteen states – Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas – and the District of Columbia.

important as states vied for \$4.35 billion in Race to the Top funds from the U.S. Department of Education, as this issue of *Voices in Urban Education* went to press. In the rush to prepare bids, states were looking to address teacher evaluation and compensation, often in isolation.

Without a comprehensive approach to addressing the needs of the whole teacher that includes evaluation, support, and compensation, well-intentioned policy changes will, at best, lead to marginal improvement in student test scores. At worst, they will result in unintended consequences such as the disillusionment of many effective educators and, in turn, decreased student learning.

This article will address two inter-related policy questions:

- Should we provide additional compensation to teachers based on the performance of the whole school or on the individual teacher's performance?
- Why address compensation, professional development, multiple measures of teaching effectiveness, and teacher advancement at the same time?

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How we reward teachers for facilitating solid outcomes for students must move beyond the constraints of the traditional salary-schedule-versus-merit-pay debate.

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The first question leads to many other questions and, sometimes, to heated disagreements. How do we determine effectiveness? Who determines effectiveness? Do we measure inputs or outputs? Do we measure teacher and/or student performance? Without addressing each of these individual questions, this article will attempt to use research and practice to inform the discussion.

The second question addresses the challenge of how to accomplish lasting and measurable improvement in teacher effectiveness – and the importance of aligning the many structures that support teachers and hold them accountable to the goal of sustained student achievement.

### ***Whole-School and Individual Performance Compensation***

*Should we provide additional compensation to teachers based on the performance of the whole school or on the individual teacher's performance?*

The answer is, clearly, *both*. The issue of how we reward teachers for facilitating solid outcomes for students must move beyond the constraints of the traditional salary-schedule-versus-merit-pay debate. The TAP system and districts like Denver and New York City are creatively and collaboratively looking at how to reward and retain the teachers who make the greatest contribution to student learning while also working with less-effective teachers to improve their performance.

TAP bases its performance bonuses on three targeted measures: 50 percent for classroom evaluations, 30 percent for individual class gains, and 20 percent for school-wide gains. The evaluations are based on multiple observations by multiple observers. The gain scores are based on value-added calculations that include

individual classrooms and the school. These multiple measures of effectiveness mitigate the potential for capricious individual measures.<sup>2</sup>

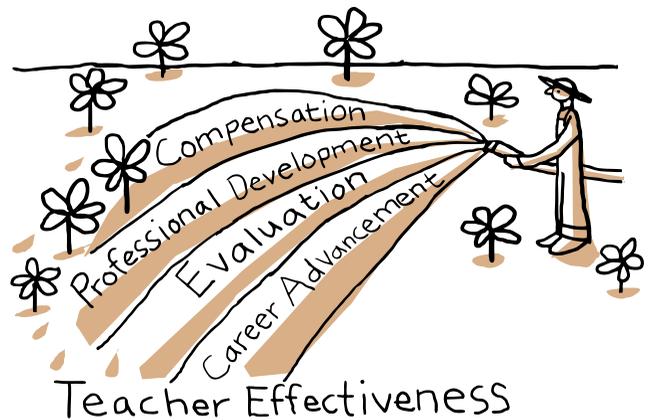
### Rethinking Assumptions about Individual Performance Pay

Teachers unions have expressed some support – albeit often lukewarm – for compensation reform in general. But individual performance pay is almost a non-starter in collective bargaining. Opponents cite numerous reasons why individual performance pay is problematic. For example, in a recent *Education Week* commentary, Kim Marshall (2009) presents a number of these arguments that are based on certain widely held assumptions. For each assumption, I will present a counterargument based on a different set of assumptions and on data from TAP schools.

- *Assumption: Individual performance pay destroys teamwork.*

There is no evidence that this happens. Data from a 2009 TAP national survey shows that TAP, which includes individual incentives, can enhance collegiality: 94 percent of teachers in TAP schools agreed with statements reporting a high level of collegiality in their schools, with 72 percent strongly agreeing. This reported level of collegiality

<sup>2</sup> TAP mainly uses Sanders's EVAAS model – the most common type – for value-added. Chicago TAP uses Rob Meyer's Wisconsin model. In statistical terms, 5 is significantly higher than average at about the 95 percent confidence level, 4 is significantly higher than average at about the 70 percent confidence level, 3 is indistinguishable from the average, 2 is significantly lower than average at about the 70 percent confidence level, and 1 is significantly lower than average at about the 95 percent confidence level.



has grown over the years from already high levels (NIET 2010).

Economic theory suggests that individual incentives should be *combined* with group incentives – not *replaced entirely* by group incentives. A system that recognizes only schoolwide student achievement results fails to provide focus or emphasis on the ways that individual teachers can improve their craft and increase their students' achievement.

The 2009 survey in TAP schools showed that incentives, when combined with a comprehensive approach to teaching effectiveness, can improve – rather than hinder – collaboration among teachers and outcomes for students. Teachers in TAP schools expressed overwhelming support for *both* instructionally focused accountability *and* performance incentives. That support is grow-

ing, with 94 percent of teachers supporting accountability and 75 percent supporting performance incentives (NIET 2010).

- *Assumption: Extra pay will not impact instruction, since teachers are already doing all they can.*

For teachers who are already performing beyond expectations in all respects, extra pay serves as a reward and a precaution against the resentment that can come when such performance goes unrewarded. Opportunities for additional pay also attract talented people into the teaching profession who might have chosen other careers.

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## It is both possible and desirable to combine group incentives, individual performance pay, and differentiated pay for special responsibilities.

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But for many teachers, improving effectiveness is less about working harder in the classroom than about committing to ongoing, collaborative improvement based on formative feedback about performance. And for teachers who either cannot or will not become effective educators, a pay system in which they do not get the bonuses that others get may create an incentive to seek other

occupations, thus improving the educational outcomes of future students.

When teachers in the TAP system talk about why TAP works, they emphasize that the bonuses are not their main focus, but rather a tangible benefit for the outstanding work of the group and the individual signifying the tremendous value added by each member of the team (Van Hook, Lee & Ferguson 2010).

- *Assumption: Standardized tests measure family advantages or disadvantages rather than the teacher's input.*

Standardized tests are impacted by both the family's background and the teacher's input. Value-added methods, coupled with rigorous and repeated observation and evaluation, filter out a student's family advantages and disadvantages so that the teacher's contribution to student learning over the course of the year can be measured. To argue otherwise is to throw out the very substantial research evidence that teachers make a crucial difference in student achievement gains.

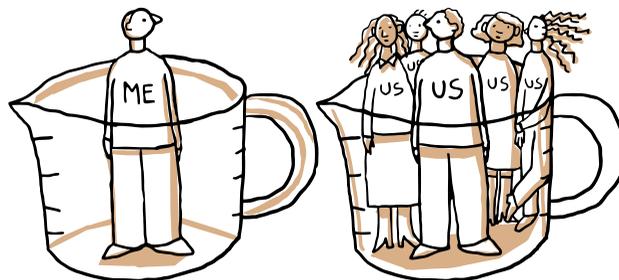
- *Assumption: Performance pay ignores the contribution of teachers who work with small groups or teach in untested grades and subjects, and it also ignores the previous contribution of the teachers who taught this year's students in earlier years.* In addition to rigorous observation and evaluation of all teachers, value-added methods account for the contribution of all teachers at a specific grade level who contribute to a student's success in

a particular subject. Moreover, the best solution for this potential problem would be to add schoolwide incentives to the performance pay system, not avoid individual incentives for those teachers whose performance can be measured.

- *Assumption: Performance pay based on test scores will create high-stakes incentives to cheat.*

A well-designed performance pay system balances test-based accountability with other measures such as classroom observations, and it keeps individual incentives in an appropriate proportion with base salaries and team incentives. Thus, any incentives to cheat are low-stakes, while the consequences of being caught cheating provide a high-stakes counterbalance to that temptation. Research suggests that cheating is minimized when individuals participate in a strong social network with a culture of collaboration and mutual accountability, which is exactly what the TAP system creates within a school (Annen 2003; Brass, Butterfield & Scaggs 1998).

Marshall (2009) offers some strong recommendations – salary increments for master teachers, higher pay for teachers in challenging schools or subjects, group incentives for gains in student learning. However, contrary to what Marshall posits, these recommendations need not be incompatible with individual performance pay. It is both possible and desirable to combine group incentives, individual performance pay, and differentiated pay for special responsibilities – the approach pioneered by the TAP system – especially when the system is based on



multiple measures and integrated with an on-site collaborative process for improvement based on accountability.

We do not know the best way to compensate teachers to increase student learning; more research on both individual and team incentives is needed. The limited reliable research on pay-for-performance plans is either not yet finished or does not demonstrate a clear direction on group versus individual incentives. Both group and individual incentives in experimental and quasi-experimental designs have resulted in modest positive effects as measured by student achievement (Podgursky & Springer 2007; Springer 2009).

#### **Timely Data, Better Alignment**

For teachers, the school-level value-added data would be helpful in improving instruction, but not nearly as helpful as having timely data that address the growth and success of individual students in their classrooms.

One way to ensure that helpful, teacher-level data are collected is to compensate at the individual level. NIET has found that states and districts are more likely to dig down to the individual classroom level for data analysis if compensation is attached to that level; if additional compensation were based solely at the school level, the data analysis would likely stop there. As momentum builds for classroom-level analysis for states that have been seeking Race to the Top funds, this level of analysis will likely become more commonplace and become an asset to states as well as teachers.

Ideally, individual and group incentives will recognize individual excellence while encouraging collaboration to enhance the effectiveness of the school as a whole. Combining group and individual incentives and aligning goals to benefit both the individual and the group provides data and accountability at the classroom level and creates a sense of shared responsibility.

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**Good teachers do work hard and are not waiting for more pay to work harder. This is why compensation reform alone is not enough.**

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The other three pillars of the TAP system are based on a similar premise of individual and group effectiveness. Just as TAP employs multiple measures of effectiveness, TAP also uses multiple approaches to support and advancement. Multifaceted challenges require multifaceted approaches (Jerald 2009).

### ***A Comprehensive Approach to Increasing Teacher Effectiveness***

*Why address compensation, professional development, multiple measures of teaching effectiveness, and teacher career advancement at the same time?*

Few teachers would argue that merely adding a bonus to a paycheck would be enough to improve educational outcomes. Good teachers do work hard and are not waiting for more pay to work harder. This is why compensation reform alone is not enough. Some districts and organizations are beginning to understand the need for comprehensive overhaul. By aligning professional development, multiple measures of teaching effectiveness, compensation, and teacher career advancement, we can improve outcomes for students and teachers.

Many well-intentioned states, districts, policy-makers, and educators have attempted to improve teaching quality by focusing on only one or two of these four levers. Professional development has probably been the lever of choice for the longest period of time: either bringing in outside experts to address large groups of teachers on central office-identified needs, or sending teachers to outside workshops on teacher-identified needs. The problem with traditional professional develop-

ment is that it does not transfer from training to practice; there is no system in place to support teachers and hold them accountable for what they learn.

In contrast, the hallmarks of the TAP system are its coordination of evaluation, job-embedded professional development facilitated by master and mentor teachers located in the school, and recognition of teaching excellence. The TAP system addresses all four levers for school improvement in a comprehensive, tightly aligned system (Jerald 2009).

### Evaluation

TAP differentiates teaching effectiveness through multiple observations, observers, and measures. The foundation of both the evaluations and teacher support is the TAP *Teaching Skills, Knowledge and Responsibilities Performance Standards*, a set of twenty-six research-based indicators of effective classroom instruction. After each evaluation, teachers receive a score of 1 to 5, with 5 being exemplary.

A NIET (2010) research summary shows the distribution of teacher evaluation ratings on the TAP 5-point scale, demonstrating what sets the TAP system apart from most other evaluation systems (see Figure 1). The mean evaluation score for TAP teachers nationwide is 3.5 out of 5. In contrast, Weisberg and colleagues (2009) found:

In districts that use binary evaluation ratings (generally “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory”), more than 99 percent of teachers receive the satisfactory rating. Districts that use a broader range of rating options do little better; in these districts, 94 percent of teachers receive one of the top two ratings and less than one percent are rated unsatisfactory. (p. 6)

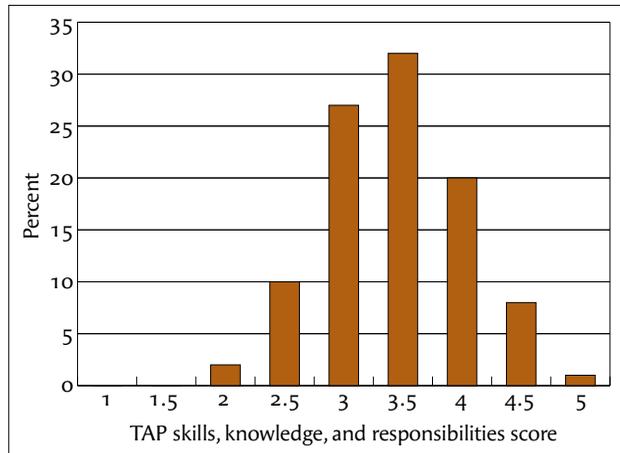


Figure 1: Distribution of TAP teacher evaluation ratings in TAP schools

Note: Analysis is based on NIET internal data for 7,377 teacher-year cases in 138 schools in 12 states, for school years 2004–2005 through 2007–2008. The data include all TAP teachers in all states for which NIET has data in those years.

Source: NIET 2010

In TAP schools, teachers are observed and evaluated four to six times per year. Highly trained master and mentor teachers observe teachers and provide feedback, allowing rigorous and frequent evaluations (Eckert 2009).

Moreover, teachers are evaluated based on value-added growth measures that rate the teacher’s impact on student learning as identified by individual student gains on assessments over time. Value-added models vary, but generally involve observing at least two data points for a student at different times on vertically aligned tests to determine growth that could be attributed to the

teacher (see footnote 2 on page 27). In a recent analysis of 1,780 TAP teachers, there was strong correlation between the TAP skills, knowledge, and responsibilities and the teacher's value-added scores (NIET 2010).

### **Professional Development**

TAP's multiple measures of teaching effectiveness inform professional development for individuals and teams of teachers. Master and mentor teachers receive release time from their classes to work with teachers through job-embedded professional development. Along with administrators, the master and mentor teachers assist teachers in analyzing student work and data. Based on value-added data and classroom observation data, teachers work together to identify "just-in-time" supports and professional development that will help teachers grow in areas where student work indicates growth is needed.

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In most schools, teachers are so isolated and receive so little useful data on their students that they would be hard-pressed to provide evidence of their effectiveness beyond anecdotal narratives.

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### **Career Advancement**

TAP's professional development is directly tied to the career advancement, compensation, and evaluation of teachers in TAP schools. Teachers who have been identified as effective through multiple measures become master and mentor teachers. Instead of layering on more work for already hardworking teachers, TAP provides release time from class and additional pay for additional work outside the school day and traditional school calendar for its master and mentor teachers. In so doing, TAP not only recognizes and rewards effective teachers, but also enables those teachers to help raise the level of effective instruction among their colleagues. These master and mentor teachers become instructional leaders who have credibility with their colleagues, the time to help facilitate improvement, and the skills to provide innovative research- and practice-based approaches to improving results for students.

### **Privileging Excellence and Improvement**

High-performing teachers – those receiving recognition and rewards for effectiveness under the TAP system – are more likely to remain in their schools, and underperforming teachers under the TAP system are more likely to leave (see Figure 2). In most schools, teachers are so isolated and receive so little useful data on their students that they would be hard-pressed to provide evidence of their effectiveness beyond anecdotal narratives. The TAP system is designed to ensure that teachers understand how they are doing and support teachers where they are, and then move them forward. This creates a cycle that privileges excellence and improvement. At the same time, the

system identifies areas where improvement is not occurring and can help facilitate change.

### **The High Cost of Keeping the Current System**

In difficult financial times, many district administrators may argue that there is not money for individual or whole-school performance bonuses, let alone a comprehensive system such as TAP. However, systems such as TAP move districts from relying solely on poorly aligned individual incentives built into the traditional salary structure toward more effectively aligned whole-group and individual incentives based on student learning.

The current system is composed solely of individual incentives that are decoupled from student outcomes. These incentives include: generous pensions, nearly guaranteed pay raises for additional years of experience, bonuses for advanced degree attainment, and a substantial amount of vacation time. The question is, do these incentives attract and retain the most effective teachers? Taken as a whole, one could easily argue that they do not. In most cases, after teaching for fifteen years in a district, it would be imprudent financially for teachers to leave the district due to the generous pension that awaits their retirement. Studies have shown that neither a master's degree nor teaching experience beyond the first five years are strong predictors of a teacher's effectiveness, as measured by student achievement gains (Aaronson, Barrow & Sander 2007; Murnane 1975; Murnane & Phillips 1981; Rice 2003; Rivkin, Hanushek &

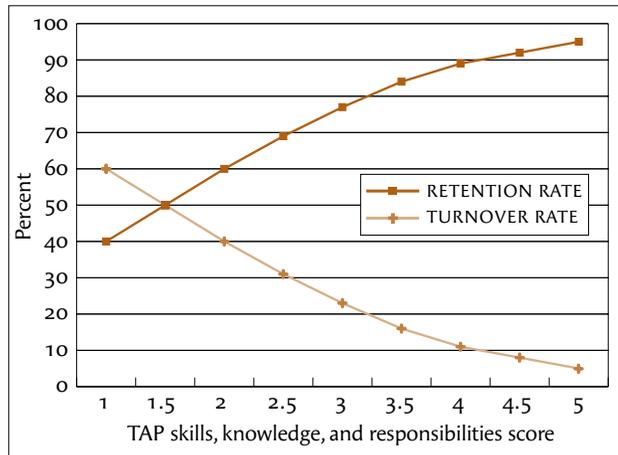


Figure 2: Retention and turnover rates by TAP teacher effectiveness rating in TAP schools

Note: Analysis is based on NIET internal data for 7377 teacher-year cases in 138 schools in 12 states, for school years 2004–2005 through 2007–2008 (with retention into school years 2005–2006 through 2008–2009). The data include all TAP teachers in all states for which NIET has data in those years.

Source: NIET 2010

Kain 2005). However, districts across the U.S. spend over \$8.6 billion on the master's salary increase alone (Roza & Miller 2009). The individual incentives in the current system and the lack of any group incentives may not attract or retain the most effective teachers.

After spending twelve years on the traditional salary schedule teaching in public schools, I spent a year trying to improve public education as a Teaching Ambassador Fellow at the U.S. Department of Education. Now I am a college professor who teaches twenty- and twenty-one-year-olds how to be effective educators, and I love it because I love teaching. But if I had had

the benefit of a system of recognition, support, and reward for excellence like the TAP system, it would have been a powerful incentive to stay in the K–12 public school teaching profession.

Career educators can only sit through so many differentiated instruction professional development days that are not differentiated and do not address our needs. We can only watch for so long as a few uninspired teachers collect relatively large paychecks waiting for their pensions to kick in. We have limited patience for being acted on by policies made by people who have not been in a classroom for a very long time, if ever. However, comprehensive reform that includes additional performance-based compensation, professional development, multiple measures of effectiveness, and career advancement could dramatically change the way we think about teaching and learning – and dramatically improve teacher quality and student outcomes.

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# Professional Learning Communities: Building Blocks for School Culture and Student Learning

Milbrey W. McLaughlin and  
Joan E. Talbert

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*Professional learning communities that center on students, use data effectively, distribute expertise, and enjoy district-level leadership and investment are proving to have a powerful impact on school culture, instructional quality, and student outcomes.*

**P**rofessional learning communities (PLCs) have gained increasing attention from researchers over the last twenty years or so and have been present in schools for even longer. While in the past, they were often seen as a “boutique” exercise rather than part of a larger reform, PLCs are gaining increasing traction and notice in various settings and in a number of school districts as a way of improving teaching quality and student achievement.

Milbrey McLaughlin and Joan Talbert have been studying professional learning communities together and separately for many years. Their most recent joint book on the subject is *Building School-Based Teacher Learning Communities* (McLaughlin & Talbert 2006). They spoke with *VUE* guest editor Marla Ucelli-Kashyap about the evolution of and evidence about PLCs.

*What is an effective professional learning community? What are their characteristics and what do you think of the state of evidence that they can really make a difference for student outcomes?*

JOAN TALBERT: You can use all sorts of different language around this – community of practice, collaborative practice, PLC – but it is a group of individuals who share a goal and work together to achieve the goal, assess their progress, make corrections, and hold themselves accountable for achieving their common goal. Typically, people think of *teachers* in learning communities. But [PLCs] can be principals across schools in a district. Central office can

function as a professional learning community. And, of course, [PLCs can be] teachers in grade-level teams in elementary schools – or in high school subject departments, or cross-discipline teams working with the same set of students. Such groups are PLCs to the extent that they are doing joint work together and have norms of collaboration and mutual accountability.

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: I would add to that: very clear norms of openness and candor and learning from failure, so the cultural shift is actually quite profound for educators. Learning communities also are characterized by a lot of information and data in doing joint work that is supported by an internal system of accountability. I think one of the things that struck us in looking at

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PLCs across a number of initiatives is there is a point where the accountability for student outcomes is pulled into the community – as opposed to having someone doing it to you. So, even in a high-stakes accountability context, we find that internal sense of professional responsibility.

### ***The Impact of Professional Learning Communities on Student Achievement***

*When you looked at professional learning communities that had the kind of norms that you have just been talking about and the ability to learn from failure, what is their impact?*

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: Well, Joan, you are sitting on a pile of data right now.

JOAN TALBERT: Yes. The most up-close kind of evidence that we see all the time is that a group of teachers is looking closely at their students' learning outcomes and skill gaps and figuring out ways to work together to address the gaps and come back and see how the students did. Key is design-

ing an intervention for addressing the student learning needs – then assessing the results and then coming back and either trying something new or moving on. So, to document outcomes of the PLC you can look at data the teachers develop to assess the students' learning of the particular things that they have attended to.

In addition, we and others have done correlational analyses where we look across teacher groups or across schools at the extent of “PLCness” to see if that predicts gains in student achievement. We found, repeatedly, strong effects of teacher collaboration on gains in student learning at the school level and in smaller groups. A group called Pearson Achievement Solutions has been doing a fairly extensive analysis of student outcomes related to their model of developing grade-level learning teams.<sup>1</sup> They have some pretty impressive evidence of student learning gains in a kind of interrupted time series analysis. You can see the shift in the growth of student achievement after the learning teamwork begins and in relation to comparison schools within the district as a whole. I think evidence is beginning to accumulate of strong student outcomes – but the problem of developing the PLCs is the challenge.



<sup>1</sup> William Saunders of Pearson, Claude Goldenberg of Stanford, and Ronald Gallimore of UCLA (2009) studied grade-level teaming efforts in a large urban school district in southern California where teachers had been provided explicit teaming protocols in school-based training. They found the experimental schools exhibited greater student achievement growth on state-mandated tests over three years than comparison schools in the same district.

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: Wouldn't you also say that where the student effects are most evident is at the bottom of the distribution, since a lot of these communities spend their time working around questions of student failure or poor achievement? I am thinking of the SAM [Scaffolded Apprenticeship Model]/New Visions schools in New York City.

JOAN TALBERT: Yes, [there is an] increase of students being on track that we have been seeing among schools doing a particular kind of PLC initiative we have been evaluating in New York City. The veteran schools in SAM have a significantly better rate of bringing students from being off track to being on track to graduate compared to schools that have not been involved with SAM.<sup>2</sup>

*Are there any fine points, in terms of implementation or results, around the effectiveness of professional learning communities in changing school culture and teaching practices that are related to particular characteristics, like grade level or racial and ethnic composition of the teaching staff?*

JOAN TALBERT: There is not really hard evidence on composition. One thing that we've argued and I think we have evidence to support – though it's not published at this point – is that there

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<sup>2</sup> SAM is a program co-developed by the Baruch College School of Public Affairs and New Visions for Public Schools in New York City that integrates a university-based, degree-granting leadership development program with school reform via school-based inquiry teams. The Center for Research on the Context of Teaching at Stanford is the evaluator the SAM program. For more information and data about the impact of SAM on off-track and on-track graduation rates, see Talbert et al. 2009.

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**We found, repeatedly, strong effects of teacher collaboration on gains in student learning at the school level and in smaller groups.**

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has to be some sort of critical mass of experienced, skilled teachers in the group. Maybe it is only one out of three teachers or something like that ratio in a larger group who have strong instructional skills.

We often find, in the poorest schools with high teacher turnover and where grade-level teams are organized to try and bring people together for planning time, that brand-new teachers forming a team are struggling with rudiments of instruction. And they just don't have the knowledge resources amongst them to effectively collaborate to improve student achievement. So this is a question of whether the group has sufficient teacher experience and expertise to learn together and make good decisions about interventions to improve student learning.

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## An important role for district administrators is modeling the norm of learning from failure.

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### ***Shifting Attention from the Subject Matter to the Student***

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: Right. You don't want a whole bunch of newbies. And one of the things that we stressed in our book is that this is a district-level responsibility.<sup>3</sup> Make sure that – almost like a starter yeast – capacity exists in the school to support a teacher learning community, versus the dance of the lemons and/or assigning new teachers to some of the most difficult schools.

The other thing, and this is what I think is so exciting about the New Visions/SAM work, is that high schools are often difficult simply because teachers tend to be subject centered and not student centered. That is kind of a broad generalization, but some of the cross-discipline or cross-subject collaboration we've seen is just so exciting: people discovering that the same student who is having trouble in English is also having trouble in science or in mathematics and teachers really coming together to see that individual not just through the lenses of the subject matter.

JOAN TALBERT: Yeah, that is really a good point. I think the SAM design is particularly well suited to shifting teachers' attention from their own

instruction in the content area to student learning and then working to figure out what are the high-leverage interventions or responses that they should make as a team or as a school to address a learning gap among struggling students.

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: I am sure all of us remember this famous expression, though I don't even know where it came from: "I'm teaching and you're not learning." High school teachers are particularly susceptible to that. Some of the focus groups we've conducted with teacher teams where a learning community exists across disciplines have been so exciting – listening to them put subject matter aside and really focusing on individual learners.

### ***District-Level Responsibility***

*What is the responsibility of districts in making professional learning communities possible and successful? How can districts reconcile what you mandate to support professional learning communities and what you allow to flourish on its own?*

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: I am not sure I have a direct answer to your question, but in the things we have learned about districts, for sure, is that the equity issue is so important. I have this debate with my students who come from charter schools when they say, why do we need districts? There really are system responsibilities in that context. The one thing we've seen across a

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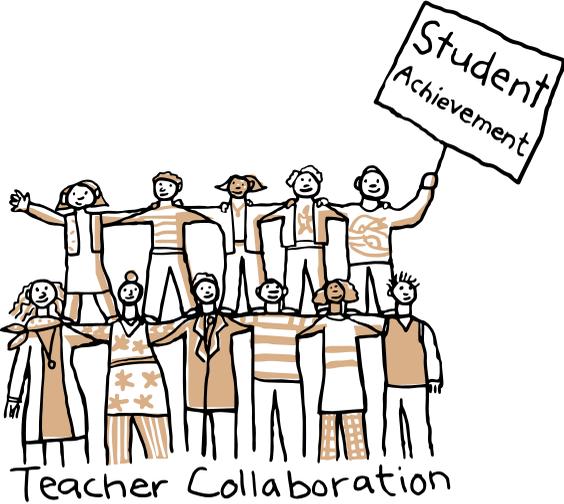
<sup>3</sup> See McLaughlin and Talbert 2006.

number of initiatives is the important role the district plays in terms of data generation and use. We need some district support for the curriculum for the teacher learning community and that capacity just doesn't exist in most schools. So New Visions has one way of doing it, other districts have other ways of doing it. In San Jose, California, in particular, there is a critical district role.

Another important role for district administrators is modeling the norm of learning from failure. Tony Alvarado is always so articulate about this and being candid about successes and disappointments. It needs to come from the top. Similarly, the roles of principals are key. We've seen really vital professional learning communities just completely evaporate with the change of the principal, who didn't share the importance of collectivity and, rather, wanted to go back to a more command and control style of leadership. So that taught us that even some of the strong teacher communities can still be very fragile in system terms.

JOAN TALBERT: Just given the accountability pressures these days on schools, districts can do a lot to squelch the development of collaboration. And we've seen that, of course, over and over again. But the idea of fidelity in sticking to the curriculum, doing pacing guides, keeping the pace of the curriculum, is really not conducive to teacher collaboration and problem solving. It puts all the pressure on implementation of curriculum and, to the extent districts feel that that is the way to go, they can undermine professional learning communities.

Your question is really what has to happen at the top. I think one answer is to keep everyone focused on developing PLCs and collaborative responsibilities so as not to bring a whole bunch



of other reform initiatives in and pull teachers' time away from work together.

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: That is important. It really needs to be a top priority.

### ***The Impact of Federal Policy on Teacher Collaboration***

*Currently, federal policies and resources are driving a lot of things states and districts are doing, through emphasizing teaching quality and measurement of individual teacher performance, along with a strong focus on school accountability and some dramatic strategies to turn around failing schools. Is there some cause for concern about the survival of a collaborative strategy that is focused on instructional improvement, with all those other pressures around it?*

JOAN TALBERT: I think the Race to the Top emphasis on linking individual teacher quality to student outcomes is potentially a really serious risk, because it can force teachers into a competitive stance with colleagues and discourage knowledge sharing and collaboration. I don't know if you saw the *Education Week* piece that Kim Marshall did on merit pay.<sup>4</sup> I think that was an excellent statement of exactly how that comes up against the collaborative PLC work.

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: And most of that learning from failure is really central. That's why we think there is built-in tension, as Joan was saying, with a lot of the Race to the Top and the high-stakes accountability stuff.

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<sup>4</sup> See Marshall 2009.

*Imagine you are sitting right now talking to a superintendent of a pressured urban school district that is teetering on the edge of the next level of corrective action. What would you say to convince him or her that investing in a capacity building strategy that takes a while to take root is going to have some payoff for them? Would you make that argument at all?*

JOAN TALBERT: I would. I am convinced. I may have mentioned the Sanger school district in California's Central Valley that has really devoted itself to developing PLCs across all district schools for about the last five years.<sup>5</sup> They have had tremendous gains in student achievement across all their thirteen K–12 schools and have brought all schools and the district out of program improvement (PI) status.

It is astonishing to see what a real focus on that kind of development of collective responsibility, data use, and collaboration to improve student learning can do. They have a core instructional program and general design for interventions, but are focused on developing PLCs and not bringing in other things that might derail or distract from the effort. There isn't any short-term fix that could be an alternative to this kind of long-term capacity building.

### ***The Importance of Data***

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: I would make the same argument and add the important role that data plays, along with the district responsibility for this. I am thinking in particular of San Jose, where the whole district is in program improvement. Several years ago, when they were under a desegregation order,

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<sup>5</sup> See DuFour et al. 2010 and the Sanger Unified School District Web site at <[www.sanger.k12.ca.us](http://www.sanger.k12.ca.us)>.

Superintendent Linda Murray made the choice to respond to that by disaggregating data throughout the district. Data for every individual teacher and every kid and, for each kid, the particular standards or assessments of standards are completely public, both inside and outside the school. So, for example, you would know if a kid was having an issue with reading – you would know whether it was comprehension or whatever.

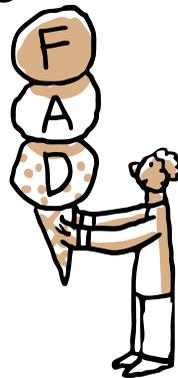
So, that level of data is a huge part of professional learning communities in that district, and they have data that shows certainly not gap closings but incredible growth of the English language learner community in San Jose. And the district would lay that squarely on teacher learning communities – professionals working together. The district targets professional development based on some of the data on particular schools. It is really one of the strongest district data systems I have seen.<sup>6</sup> This is a grain-size issue. It is one thing to say 10 percent of your students are failing in whatever, but you need to get down inside of standards and see where teaching is falling short.

### ***PLCs: Structural Change Versus Fad***

*What are the differences in policy, practice, and knowledge that are driving what seems to be more of a focus on professional learning communities now than was the case twenty years ago?*

JOAN TALBERT: It is really interesting. I think it takes a long time for those ideas that are a nontraditional way of

## Flavor of the Month

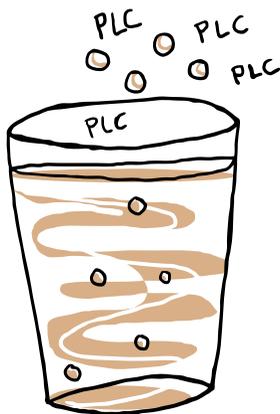


thinking about improvement to catch hold. It's not a program, it's not professional development around content specifically, it's not the "quick fix" kind of strategy that has been used over many, many years. I think it is turning a very, very large ship rather than making a quick change in one direction. There is so much talk about fads in education, but I don't think this is a faddish kind of change. It has taken a very long time for people in key positions to make investments in this. The National Staff Development Council has explicitly called for organizing adults into learning communities in their professional development standards documents since 2005. So I think it has only been in the last very small number of years that any school districts have taken this on.

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: I think that is right, and I would add that there are some real caveats here. The downside of what you just described, Marla and Joan, is that it is the new flavor of the month and the new good solution.

<sup>6</sup> For example, see the district's annual school climate surveys at <[www.sjUSD.org/school/district/info/C140](http://www.sjUSD.org/school/district/info/C140)>; Education Trust–West 2010; and District Administration Custom Publishing Group 2008.

We have seen projects start professional learning communities totally not understanding what kind of support they need. Or, [they] say it is the professional learning community that is going to implement what the students need to perform and we are going to give you what you need to do. There really needs to be a *learning* community. It will implement, but it is not an *implementing* community.



JOAN TALBERT: Also, we have seen in several districts now in the last several years an attempt to treat PLCs as a program to be implemented, or something you can just mandate and it will happen.

*What about less-formalized efforts to create learning communities, either within or across schools, or things that just bubble up on their own?*

JOAN TALBERT: Well, the National Writing Project is a wonderful example of interlocking one large network and lots of informal networks within it. Professional learning communities outside of schools are one of the things we found to be really key resources for learning communities within schools. It's not either-or. I think teachers who

are involved in those kinds of more or less bubbled-up professional networks outside of schools are knowledge carriers or brokers for inside the school's networks. I guess the one big difference is, if they don't have joint work, it's not precisely the way we would think of a PLC, but it's a professional community that learns together around other things. The joint work could be a study group, book study, or something.

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: I don't think we really have a lot like that example because of the joint work issue and also just the system and support for it – providing time and resources and such. I am trying to think of the ones I know that would fit your definition, Marla. They are issue specific and episodic and they go away – unlike the larger learning resources that Joan was talking about.

### ***The Role of the Community in PLCs***

*Teacher collaboration toward improved school culture and student learning is a strategy that is closely linked to what we might call professional expertise. How can that also embrace collaboration with the community beyond the school? Milbrey, you also founded a center on youth and their communities. Are there roles for the community in supporting or being part of professional learning communities in schools?*

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: That is a really fertile area, and it is one that has also been very difficult for people to get their arms around. I think some of the best examples are probably in New York City, but they involve community schools and, again, formalized relationships between in-school and out-of-

school resources. They also involve the opportunity for teachers and community members to have conversations about students or about the kinds of structures that support or get in the way of progress.

Leonard Covello [at Benjamin Franklin High School] had it right many years ago.<sup>7</sup> Those are the kinds of structures. We have some community schools here in California that are doing that, also. There are things called family resource centers and other kinds of non-school community resources that I think have made important progress in formalizing relationships with teachers – sometimes through an afterschool program but, again, a formal venue for conversations about student learning and experience within and outside the school.

It is really, really hard to do because some teachers say, “It’s not my job,” or, “What happens in the family resource center is not my job.” But there are examples, especially within the community schools, where the two institutional settings are really having productive conversations. Joan, I’m also thinking of our Students at the Center experience<sup>8</sup> and the project that I thought had an amazing model for professional development. It involved the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia and several district schools. The project involved parents in teachers’ professional development and they found an astonishing asset developing, in that high-poverty, African American parents became knowledgeable about the

curriculum and curriculum goals and were able to support it at home. The teachers were so cynical at first: “You are going to involve these parents in my Franklin Institute science class?” But they came to appreciate it as a resource for their own classroom activities and goals, because the parents understood what was going on in the classroom and supported it.

### ***Building Capacity for Developing PLCs***

*What about the capacity to build professional learning communities? Can it be built in the district, or is there always a need for a relationship with an external support organization of some sort?*

JOAN TALBERT: Good question. It varies and maybe should shift over time. For example, the Boston Plan for Excellence [BPE] has been filling the key role of providing facilitators to support development of school teams under a SAM initiative in the district. BPE now is working with Boston Public Schools to develop its own facilitator expertise

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**We have seen projects start professional learning communities totally not understanding what kind of support they need. There really needs to be a *learning* community. It will implement, but it is not an *implementing* community.**

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<sup>7</sup> See Johaneck and Puckett 2007.

<sup>8</sup> During the mid-1990s, Stanford’s CRC documented professional development in Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York City under this five-year initiative funded by the DeWitt Wallace–Reader’s Digest Fund.



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Time is a huge priority, so a sustained focus on PLCs is key, as is a commitment to developing distributed expertise and leadership for professional collaboration at all system levels.

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to lead PLC development in all district schools. I think all our research and that of others who have been following PLC development point to the importance of having trained and skilled facilitators to help bring about the changes and sustain the work.

So, I would definitely say district capacity can be built. But that, actually, is one of the challenges of this. I think the partnerships between districts and intermediaries around these [PLC] initiatives have sometimes been rocky. How dependent the district might be on ongoing facilitation from outside partners versus how much the organization can actually develop the facilitating skills of teachers in schools is a real question. I think definitely that the leadership should be embedded in the district. But partly, that is building the middle system of the district.

*Speaking of the organizational capacity to do this work at any kind of scale, what would be your advice to funders, district policy-makers, policy-makers at other levels, and reform support organizations about improving teaching quality by focusing on the collective work of teachers, particularly in our most challenged school settings? What should they put their resources and energy into?*

JOAN TALBERT: I tend to think about the social-normative side, the technical side, and the organizational side. And we have to invest in all three of those. The social-normative side includes trust and support for risk-taking, leadership, and modeling the priorities of collaboration and data use. The technical side includes multiple measures of students' learning, common assessments linked to standards, and quick results turnaround. The organizational side includes common planning time, professional development for facilitators,

or partnering with external facilitators. Time is a huge priority, so a sustained focus on PLCs is key, as is a commitment to developing distributed expertise and leadership for professional collaboration at all system levels.

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: Data, data, data – at a fine-grained size. The technical side includes the data and, also, protocols for PLC work could be really helpful – also, recognizing that the data that teachers need are not the same data that administrators might need. San Jose is a well-developed example of a place with a fairly differentiated understanding of data that are needed at different levels of the system. So teachers get one thing, principals get another kind of data, and central office yet another.

JOAN TALBERT: And a data system that can manage formative student assessment data in a very quick turnaround is key if teacher PLCs are to use it to continually improve instruction. So, what's happening in New York City is that schools are buying their own software so that teachers can enter the data and analyze it and get results within days. It requires technical investments at all system levels to get useful data.

MILBREY MCLAUGHLIN: Yet again, clear district leadership. This goes back to really modeling from the top what it is like to use data.

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# *A Pioneering Collaboration to Improve Reading in Central Falls*

Christine Wiltshire, Frances Gallo,  
and Kath Connolly

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*An urban school district and a charter school have forged a successful – and unusual – partnership to share best teaching practices and collectively support early reading proficiency.*

**T**he Growing Readers Initiative is a professional development partnership between an urban school district and a charter school – one of the few examples nationally of such collaboration. The Learning Community, a K–8 charter school founded in 2004, has developed a coordinated program to build strong readers in the early grades. Through the Growing Readers Initiative, teachers, coaches, specialists, and administrators from the charter school are working alongside their colleagues in the neighboring Central Falls School District to share best practices teacher-to-teacher, share systems of support and data analysis, and encourage a team approach to student achievement.

Growing Readers is a successful, working example of truly targeted, collective practice. Grade-level teams of teachers design targeted lessons by using Rhode Island state standards and the work of the New Standards Project as common measures. Teachers receive coaching in their own classrooms, targeted to their needs and to those of

their students. Quarterly assessments measure the results; students who are struggling are offered tailored support from reading specialists. This layered approach affirms common goals, structures daily practice to be collaborative, and aligns resources to be responsive to clear needs.

The partnership embodies the original promise of the charter school movement – to spur innovation in the larger system of public education. Through Growing Readers, lessons learned in one school reach three times as many students. Initial results are positive, but all partners agree that the work is in its infancy and that relationships, whether on a collegial or institutional level, take time and hard work to grow.

## ***Central Falls***

For decades, Central Falls, Rhode Island, has drawn immigrants from many parts of the world to the Blackstone Valley, birthplace of our nation’s industrial revolution. Generations came for work and brought with them talent, determination, intelligence, culture, warmth, and, above all else, their vision for a future for their children. For most families, education is the key to that vision.

*Christine Wiltshire is an instructional coach at The Learning Community. Frances Gallo is superintendent of Central Falls School District. Kath Connolly is director of partnerships at The Learning Community.*

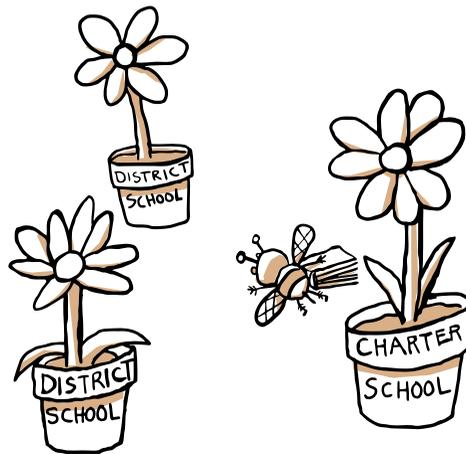
Like urban districts across the country, the schools in Central Falls have struggled to balance a belief in the district's 3,000 students and their families with the challenging effects of poverty. In 2000, 41 percent of the children of Central Falls were living below the federal poverty line – more than half (52 percent) in extreme poverty. The challenges facing the young people of this community are all too familiar to anyone who has worked with low-income urban families in the United States.

Central Falls has some outstanding teachers, committed leaders, and success stories. Families in Central Falls have made great sacrifices to provide for their children. But Central Falls also has a long history of efforts at change and reform that have left a series of piecemeal programs and solutions in their wake.

Frances Gallo became superintendent in 2007, bringing to the district a commitment to transparency and a vision that success was possible through “teamwork coupled with an unwavering focus on improving the intellectual, social, and emotional well-being of every child in every classroom.”

### ***The Learning Community***

The Learning Community, the first charter school in Central Falls, was founded in 2004 by Meg O’Leary and Sarah Friedman as an independent district reporting directly to the state. Based on their years of experience working on professional development in Providence public elementary schools, O’Leary and Friedman created a new public school designed to



address the common obstacles urban classroom teachers faced. Their vision was to build the school as a laboratory for professional development – a learning community not just for one school, but for educators throughout the state and the region.

Central to their notion of school success was the role of working collaboratively. The route to student achievement, particularly in a high-poverty community, is through creating a team of support surrounding every classroom, every teacher, and every learner, giving importance to individual voices, systematically making space for dissenting opinions, and committing to continuous reflection and improvement. All members of the school’s team are encouraged to hold one another accountable for their best work through listening, critical feedback, collaborating, and, where necessary, hard conversations.

Over its first five years The Learning Community has shown some impressive results for a school with such high poverty. Students are outperforming their peers on state standardized

tests, the school has the best rate of family engagement in the state, and the demand to become a student or a teacher at the school is high (The Learning Community 2009). Hundreds of visitors have come to the school, drawn by its results on state standardized tests, its groundbreaking work in family engagement, and its reputation as an open school interested in building and sharing new systems to support student achievement.

### ***How the Partnership Began***

Superintendent Gallo’s initial interest in The Learning Community grew from her feeling of responsibility toward *all* Central Falls public school children, whether they are in the Central Falls School District or not.

On a summer visit to a Kindergarten family the phone rang and the parents were jumping for joy. They looked at me sheepishly, telling me they just won the lottery to go to The Learning Community. And I said to them “That’s wonderful!” They were shocked. I said, “You’re still my students and by all means I’ll see you when you’re at The Learning Community.” As I was leaving, I thought, why is it that they are so excited to go there? So I decided to visit.

Gallo’s visit led her to arrange a series of open observation days at The Learning Community for principals, district administrators, and classroom teachers. These visits allowed people to observe and discuss instruction at varying grade levels. Many common concerns about charter schools were raised: What is the poverty level? How does your lottery work? Do you have any special education students? Are your teachers certified?

Central Falls and Learning Community leaders realized they had important things in common. Both groups were focused on success for all students. Both had a corps of excellent teachers. And both believed that the fundamental unit of school change is not the state, the district, or the school, but the classroom. Teachers who visited left with an understanding that the same demographic of students attend The Learning Community as the district schools, including those with special education and behavioral needs, students of color, and ELLS (see Figure 1).

	Central Falls School District	The Learning Community
Enrollment	3,000	400
Free and reduced-priced lunch	76%	88%
Students of color	88%	95%
English language learners	22%	20%

*Figure 1: Comparison of student characteristics, Central Falls School District and The Learning Community*

Conversations began about the role The Learning Community could play as a partner to the Central Falls elementary schools. The conversations quickly focused on reading instruction as a key driver of The Learning Community's success and a fundamental job of the early grades. Diagnostic assessments from the Central Falls elementary schools suggested that their students read accurately and fluently, but their comprehension lagged.<sup>1</sup> Administrators agreed that this gap contributed to students' struggles with state standardized tests, which place an emphasis on comprehension. The Learning Community proposed an initial design based on achieving immediate and tangible results recognizable to classroom teachers and building sustainable systems of support. A pilot was launched in August 2008.

### ***What Is the Growing Readers Initiative?***

Unlike many curriculum-based interventions, Growing Readers is not a new "program," but a shift in the way teachers work, the way data are used, and the way extra support is targeted. Drawing on systems successful at The Learning Community, the initiative works on four tracks.

- *Using data to inform instruction.* Every quarter, reading is assessed using nationally known tools that have been adapted for Central Falls. The Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) helps identify students who are struggling with reading, without waiting until the

end of the school year. Teachers have learned how to analyze data about students' reading comprehension, fluency, and accuracy and decide what each student needs to continue growing as a reader. Superintendent Gallo observed,

This is really a targeted intervention. Based on data. Based on observation. We all test students, but how many of us really take that test apart and decide what each student needs based on the results?

- *Targeted professional development.* Instructional Coach Christine Wiltshire offers "embedded" coaching based on teacher needs and requests. She works with individual teachers, observing instruction in their classrooms, debriefing her observations with them, and demonstrating lessons in their classrooms while they observe. Teachers are able to see that new instructional strategies will work with their own students in their own classrooms.
- *Supporting excellent instruction: Many styles, one structure.* The Learning Community shares its modified form of Reading Workshop, a technique popularized by Lucy Calkins of Columbia's Teachers College, in the Central Falls district, both as an instructional approach and as a structure for organizing the strategies that build strong readers. Coaches provide lessons plans tested at The Learning Community and then help teachers learn to craft clear

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<sup>1</sup> These internal Central Falls Schools District reading assessments are based on data from the Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS), and the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA).



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“The work we are doing is rooted in a real school. Because our approach is developed at an urban school, what we are bringing to teachers in Central Falls is from teachers to teachers.”

— Sarah Friedman, co-director,  
The Learning Community

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lesson plans using the Reading Workshop approach. “The beauty of Reading Workshop is that it is a framework that encourages student independence and allows for targeted instruction at their level,” coach Christine Wiltshire observes.

- *Rapid response for students needing more support.* Based on a similar model at The Learning Community, a reading safety net system has been created at each Central Falls school to offer support from a reading specialist to students who have fallen below benchmark. This support is in addition to regular classroom instruction, so students receive nearly twice as much small-group reading instruction. All reading specialists are learning to run safety net groups, manage quarterly assessments, analyze schoolwide data, and facilitate collaboration with classroom teachers.

This approach has helped teachers at The Learning Community feel that it is possible for them to reach each reader. One third-grade teacher observed,

Schools that are truly dedicated to excellent teaching at some point become deeply aware that it must be the work of many hands. You can’t have multifaceted reading instruction in a single-teacher model, especially with students who are coming in with English language needs.

Learning Community co-director Sarah Friedman said,

There is a sense of a team being behind every teacher. So we’re not expecting that teachers are responsible on their own for reading. There is a reading safety net team that is there to work with students.

## Results

In 2009–2010, Growing Readers is reaching every K–2 classroom in all four elementary schools in the district, serving forty-one teachers, three teaching assistants, three reading/literacy specialists, and eight hundred students. To accomplish this, Wiltshire has leveraged the participation of colleagues in numerous roles at The Learning Community to share the work between the two institutions.

It will likely take at least two more years before the collaboration will begin to show results on standardized tests such as the New England Common Assessment Program. Meanwhile, the internal measures used by Growing Readers have shown impressive initial results on the DRA, the formative assessment used by the state in grades K–2. In the pilot school, 86 percent of participating students were reading at or above the national benchmark after six months – a 39 percent gain since the initial baseline results. Between October and January, the percentage of students at or above the national benchmark in reading rose between 5 and 21 percentage points in each school.<sup>2</sup>

## What Is Making Collaboration Work?

The Growing Readers Initiative is as much about collective enterprise as it is about reading. Its very structure requires and encourages collaboration among colleagues within and across schools to support the achievement of every student. Growing Readers has only existed for two years, but there are key elements in place designed to

emphasize the long and steady work of building and strengthening these relationships.

### Specificity

The targeted nature of the professional development allows teachers to work closely together and implement quickly. All units, tools, and teaching points are discussed and refined with teachers at a single grade level. All teachers are using similar approaches across classrooms and across grades. The materials, refined at an existing school, don't require extra effort for teachers to use. As Wiltshire said, "It's not something they have to scale back or scale up for their classroom. It's the same thing – our classroom to their classroom."

The more targeted the instruction, the more effective it can be. Wiltshire observed,

What motivates the students is that they are reading at a level that is in their comfort zone. They aren't struggling through every page and every page isn't so easy that it is a waste of time. They feel many moments of success and they can see that they are applying what their teacher taught them.

### Authenticity

Learning Community co-director Sarah Friedman said,

The work we are doing is rooted in a real school. Because our approach is developed at an urban school, what we are bringing to teachers in Central Falls is from teachers to teachers. We're speaking the same language.

The Learning Community serves the same demographic populations as the Central Falls public schools, so materials have been created to work

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<sup>2</sup> For more detailed information about these data and the Growing Readers Initiative, see The Learning Community, n.d.

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“I get excited because a teacher will come to me and say, ‘Did you know a student you are working with went from here to there?’ You know it is not a one-person success – it’s a team.”

— Specialist,  
The Learning Community

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with real urban students. Central Falls teachers can see Wiltshire teach in their own classroom with their own students. Central Falls teachers also have opportunities to observe instruction at their grade level at The Learning Community and see how the various pieces of reading instruction look in another classroom. For Learning Community team members, sharing their work with colleagues requires them to be clear on their practice. As one specialist said, “When you own it, you can teach it.”

### **Dialogue and Listening**

Growing Readers includes multiple layers of dialogue. Coaching debrief sessions, meetings on assessment data, and trainings always include opportunities for reflection and conversation. Learning Community co-director Meg O’Leary observed,

[Christine] listened when the [Central Falls] teachers complained about the myriad of initiatives that have come through their classrooms. When they questioned the reasoning behind each component of the work, Christine took the time to explain. That was the beginning of earning their trust.

By listening intently to teachers and specialists, Wiltshire has identified obstacles to success at a classroom and building level and has been able to advocate for changes. More reading specialists were hired. The schedule was changed to lengthen the reading block, prompting one principal to say, “You moved a mountain!”

Those “bigger picture” changes are also mirrored in conversations about specific lessons. Wiltshire said,

Every time we do a lesson together we debrief afterwards. We talk about what were the teacher moves I made, why I made those moves, what should we do tomorrow, which kids should we target for tomorrow. That one-on-one coaching – I know I really benefited from it as a classroom teacher.

A continuous exchange of ideas has contributed to a culture of continuous improvement at The Learning Community. As one team member observed,

When I think back, it is a trial and error process. We listen to one another’s ideas. You took the good, you left the bad, and you revisited the good and made it better. That is how we have grown.

### **Respect**

In any urban district teachers will talk about the need for respect. As one Central Falls teacher said, “We need to begin with respect that we all have experience and that we all care for the kids.”

As another Central Falls educator described it,

Instead of a scripted, “This is what I have to teach today and this is what comes next,” I can really build off of what I noticed them doing today and how I want to use that to inform my instruction tomorrow.

Teachers are valued as experts, they are listened to, and, as much as possible, the issues they raise are followed up on. Frequently, teachers know what their students need to succeed but do not have the authority to realign resources to meet those needs. Learning Community co-director O’Leary observed,

Understandably, Central Falls teachers became nervous for their students around the time Christine was introducing new quarterly assessments. She listened to their concerns about the number of assessments and the assessment schedule. She looked closely at the schedule. They were right. She made changes to the schedule and further earned their trust. It is simple and yet not very commonplace in large districts. It is what feeds the best kind of relationship between any two people – respect.

### Rapid Results

All educators want results for every student in their classrooms. Growing Readers responds to this need for urgency by using assessments to catch students who are not meeting benchmark as early as possible and getting them the extra support they need from a reading specialist. Quarterly data give teachers real evidence to make adjustments to instruction and provide another way to gauge what is working in their classrooms. Seeing results – for both teachers and students – can be enormously motivating.

Superintendent Gallo tied the increased amount of data to a culture of accountability.

Data took away the subjectivity. If the students can’t perform it on the assessment then they need help until they can. ... It’s not about what you think I know, it is about what I can demonstrate I know.

Positive results and progress are motivating both for students and for teachers. As one specialist in Central Falls said, “Doing assessments quarterly allows them to see progress more often. I think teachers do get on board more when they see results.”

### Team Approach

In an era when teachers, schools, and districts are being held publicly accountable to numerical outcomes, it can be easy to seek someone to blame if the results aren’t positive. Encouraging a shared sense of accountability and teamwork across schools and between schools and families is essential to the success of urban education.

This notion of teamwork has been a key focus of The Learning Community’s culture. One specialist observed,

I especially feel like a team after assessments and you get the data. I get excited because a teacher will come to me and say, “Did you know a student you are working with went from here to there?” It is because we are a team. Everyone has a piece. You know it is not a one-person success – it’s a team.



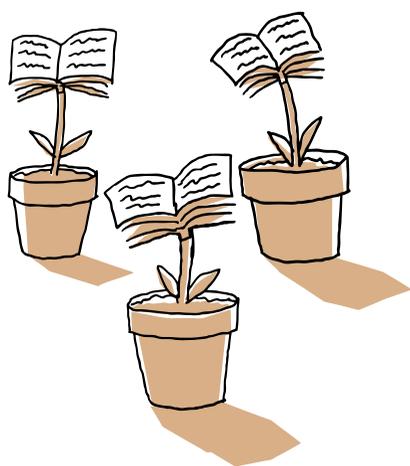
And similar things are happening in Central Falls. As one specialist there noted,

There have been teachers who have come to me to ask what I'm doing with one of their students to learn more about what that is so they can use those strategies in their classroom.

### ***What Is Hard about Working This Way?***

A wall of distrust has been built between experienced educators who have worked to repair our nation's urban schools and many of the leaders of the emerging charter school movement. O'Leary observed,

There is historic distrust on the part of public school teachers of new initiatives. That distrust is more than warranted as curriculums and sweeping reform efforts have come and gone with no consultation of teachers themselves as to what their students need. There is then little to show for it but frustrated and overstretched teachers and thoroughly confused students.



### **Doubts That All Students Can Succeed**

Working toward a sense of collective academic achievement requires everyone to believe that the students can succeed. One teacher pointed out,

Success depends on the attitude you have about the kids. . . . If it doesn't work, the question needs to be, "What can I do differently?" not "The student can't do it." . . . The whole point of the tutorial model is that kids are going to need extra support.

### **Collegiality: One More Thing on the To-Do List**

Support from colleagues is almost universally welcomed. But teachers want their students to do well, and collaboration and collegiality can feel like one more thing on a to-do list. One Central Falls educator observed,

You get stuck in, "This is what I have to do and I gotta get it done." But it keeps you fresh if you are always talking to someone else about what you are doing, what went well and what didn't work.

Current discussion nationally about holding individual teachers accountable for results can create an environment that is not conducive to collaboration. As one Central Falls specialist said,

Some people think "This is my classroom, these are my kids," but not realizing that someone else has a classroom with similar kids and similar needs so we should be communicating all the time about what is going on, because it is only going to enhance our practice.

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### **History of Ineffective Professional Development**

Teachers are accustomed to professional development that is not grade specific and not easily used. Teachers have had to do a lot of “unpacking” in order to apply the new ideas to their classroom, with limited support.

Often, a new wave of reform or a new approach is brought in by administrators before teachers are able to see any results from the previous one, often leading to understandable cynicism. As one Central Falls teacher said,

There are buildings with tons of curriculum materials in the basement because it was given to teachers half-way through the year with no chance to figure out how to implement it.

### **Resource Alignment**

Many charter schools have the freedom to manage their own resources, both human and financial, so they are able to place decisions about resource alignment close to the dynamic needs of students and teachers. In contrast, in many urban systems, it is the district that makes decisions about hiring, changes in job responsibilities, curriculum design, and other significant choices. Where possible, Growing Readers advocates for

changes that would remove some of the institutional barriers to change that Central Falls teachers encounter.

### **Misconceptions**

Misconceptions about charter schools and how they operate continue to make it difficult to nurture collaboration with traditional public schools. There are both excellent and struggling charter schools, just as there are excellent and struggling traditional public schools. Nationally, charter schools are a popular current strategy in urban school reform, which can create suspicion on the part of educators, particularly as federal and state policies begin to favor “charter school takeover” as a strategy for school change.

Some Learning Community teachers worry about how their work is being received by their colleagues in Central Falls. One team member said,

I worry that the Central Falls teachers are seeing what we do as, “This is how you should do it” instead of “This is one way to do it.” We aren’t perfect and every classroom is different.

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To form an enduring partnership will take considerable time. But there are early signs that the essential goal – clear gains in reading performance for all students – is possible.

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The best way to address misconceptions on all sides has been visitation, observation, and honest dialogue. As one Central Falls principal said,

I'm not going to lie; there was animosity at the beginning. Once they were able to sit down and get it out in the open, . . . they aired their feelings, and now everybody works great together.

#### **Vulnerability**

Excellence in education is predicated on the quality of the teacher in every classroom. These teachers work in a complicated ecosystem of students, families, and colleagues. Gallo observed, “This is a human endeavor and you touch on human frailties, issues of friendship, and loyalty.”

Collaboration and co-accountability can require professionals to ask one another to accept feedback or constructive criticism. As one Central Falls specialist said,

I am always feeling like I'm not part of the “in group” because sometimes I'll have to look at their data and make a suggestion or ask for an explanation based on the data for one reason or another.

Building a culture that encourages receptivity to constructive criticism requires constant, intentional work on the part of every team member. One Learning Community team member observed,

A culture of continuous improvement can also be exhausting. It is almost like being a really good athlete on a really strong team. No matter how well you do, there is always another race. You never feel like you are done.

In spite of the challenges, the Growing Readers Initiative has worked to build a positive culture that remains focused on the work and on teachers' supporting one another to continuously improve. As one educator said,

When she has had to be constructive with criticism, she comes in with such a professional lens and her points are so clear and gentle that I was so grateful. I was excited to try a different strategy. I want to be teachable.

#### ***Looking toward the Future: Sustainable Improvement at Scale***

The early progress of the district–charter school partnership in Central Falls is not the stuff of headlines. At the same time that Growing Readers has been achieving quiet successes, as this issue of *Voices in Urban Education* goes to press, Central Falls High School has become the epicenter of a far more

vociferous, national debate about turnaround strategies for low-performing schools.

But the struggles of one school do not occur in a vacuum. By building strong readers in early grades across an entire district, the Growing Readers partnership helps prepare students to succeed for the rest of their school careers – through high school and beyond.

To form an enduring partnership will take considerable time, particularly as the Growing Readers Initiative is just one of many unfolding in the district. But there are early signs that the essential goal – clear gains in reading performance for all students – is possible. Perhaps equally significant is that all constituents are learning new things about working collectively to improve teaching and learning.

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*Note:*

The Annenberg Institute for School reform, which publishes *Voices in Urban Education*, has been asked by Superintendent Frances Gallo to help Central Falls School District engage a wide range of stakeholders in developing an effective and sustainable turnaround plan for Central Falls High School.

# Collective Practice: Strategies for Sustainable Improvement

Robert A. Kronley and  
Marla Ucelli-Kashyap

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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.*

**T**his 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.<sup>1</sup>

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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<sup>1</sup> 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.

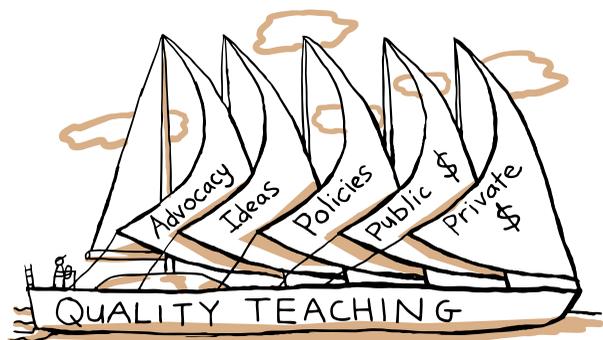
### ***The Importance of Collective Practice: A Growing Knowledge Base***

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.<sup>2</sup> 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).



<sup>2</sup> 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:<sup>3</sup>

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

<sup>3</sup> 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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Interest in teaching as collaborative work does not seek to diminish the continuing emphasis on the capacity of individual teachers and the need for every classroom teacher to meet high expectations.

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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.<sup>4</sup>

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

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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](http://www.fordfoundation.org)>).

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

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.<sup>6</sup> 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

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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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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-

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## Rethinking how teachers relate to one another is a starting point for promoting increased personalization in their relationships with students and families.

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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.<sup>9</sup>

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.

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7 See, for example, *VUE* no. 20, Summer 2008, Human Capital, available for download at <[www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/archives](http://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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9 See Milbrey McLaughlin and Joan Talbert’s article in this issue of *VUE* for a discussion of professional learning communities.

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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.

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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.”

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. 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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