

Requiring Collaboration or Distributing Leadership?

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## Requiring Collaboration or Distributing Leadership?



Distributed leadership allows teachers to share their expertise and create a collective responsibility for improving student learning — and teaches district leaders the value of inviting teachers into leadership.

**By Anne Kennedy, Angie Deuel, Tamara Holmlund Nelson, and David Slavit**

When teachers and principals share leadership in a school, both the adults and students win. Teachers have an increased sense of collective responsibility and, as a result, an increased sense of professionalism.

That's the lesson from our five-year study of five middle and high schools where teacher groups moved from voluntary to compulsory schoolwide professional learning communities. From 2004 to 2009, we studied seven teacher groups as they transitioned from voluntary to compulsory schoolwide PLC structures and processes. The choices that leaders made to create these PLCs made a difference in outcomes (Talbert in press). In this article, the experience of Silver Valley Middle School (pseudonym) illustrates three important features of distributed leadership that help create an environment characterized by ongoing professional learning. The 300-student middle school in the Pacific Northwest has an enrollment that is mostly white, and about 55% qualify for free- or reduced-price lunch. Students do not have access to advanced coursework, and only 5% of the district's students go past 10th-grade mathematics.

For two consecutive years, Silver Valley Middle School received the State Superintendent's Award as a *School of Distinction*. Only schools exceeding the state average performance on the state test in reading and math during the preceding six-year period receive the award, and Silver Valley was one of only three middle schools in the state to receive the award two years in a row (2007 and 2008).

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## **MOVING FROM VOLUNTARY TO COMPULSORY**

Secondary mathematics and science teachers in Silver Valley schools began meeting regularly in 2004. For three years, cross-grade and cross-content-area teachers explored problems of practice and developed skills for conducting collaborative action research in and across classrooms. Eight teachers voluntarily participated in activities and received support from content specialists, university science/mathematics faculty, and teachers from other schools. Teachers learned how to identify research questions based on student data, discussed different approaches to meeting student needs, and conducted collaborative action research.

In 2006, school and district leaders restructured teacher collaboration time around content and grade-level teams. High-stakes test scores were below the state average, and other schools in the state were improving achievement by moving to school-wide PLCs. To support the work, administrators selected tools and strategies recommended by colleagues and gleaned from popular literature on PLCs. School leaders believed the new procedures would help align practices across schools, and new accountability measures would enable principals to monitor and support each team.

Many characteristics of the new districtwide initiative were similar to those the mathematics and science teachers were familiar with. But shifting to compulsory collaboration still created turmoil and tension. From the teachers' perspective, the district had moved forward with a new initiative without considering the internal expertise the mathematics and science teachers could provide. They believed new structures would simply replace what they'd worked hard to develop. Teachers felt a sense of loss as ownership and control of their work began to slip away.

### **DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP AND PLC WORK**

Three important attributes of distributed leadership supported the development of strong school communities focused on improving student learning through teacher collaboration. These are: 1) a leader's recognition and use of internal intellectual and experiential resources, 2) differentiated top-down and lateral decision-making processes, and 3) culture building through dialogue and collaborative inquiry. Examining each of these attributes provides insight into effective leadership practices that support teacher collaboration and PLC work.

#### **1. Recognizing and Using Intellectual and Experiential Resources**

Perceptive leaders seek, recognize, and use teachers' expertise. We define expertise as subject knowl-

edge and pedagogical skills, as well as self-knowledge of what one does well and what one needs to learn more about. Every school includes educators who are opinion leaders or individuals with specific expertise. Sometimes, these qualities are comingled; at other times, they aren't. This is notable because status in schools isn't always ascribed to individuals with expertise or aligned with goals for teaching and learning. In some schools, teachers and school leaders acquire status because of friendship, longevity and tenure, or bonds made from a shared experience. Teachers and other leaders in schools with distributed leadership have status because they're constantly learning and then using and sharing what they've learned to support students. Status is attributed or conferred by colleagues because of a shared commitment to and knowledge of good teaching,

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understanding students, and engaging in collaboration with others. In school-based collaborative work, expertise also extends beyond subject and pedagogical expertise to include other types of knowledge such as data analysis, high-level questioning skills, action research, and knowledge of students and the community.

In Silver Valley, three teacher leaders gained significant expertise in examining their practice and student learning through ongoing and sustained work with colleagues. They adopted an inquiry cycle (see [www.vancouver.wsu.edu/stride](http://www.vancouver.wsu.edu/stride) for details) for designing and implementing different instructional approaches and studying their impact. These teachers chose an inquiry focus based on their daily classroom needs and challenges. This personal connection to their inquiry fostered a sense of immediacy, motivation, and perseverance around the work. As the districtwide PLC work began to unfold, these teacher leaders worried that teachers wouldn't fully engage in compulsory collaboration unless it was linked to problems of practice identified by teachers themselves. The lead teachers shared their concerns with the principal, and he agreed to set up a meeting between the teachers and district leaders.

Lead teachers and principals met for three hours before school began. At that meeting, principals described how PLC work would unfold. While the meeting was at times tense, it was an important turn-

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ing point for developing the district's PLC practices.

During the meeting, teachers and administrators were respectful of each other, listened to different viewpoints, and explored possibilities for integrating teachers' knowledge and skills while still supporting the new district initiative. Teachers proposed a compromise that involved introducing new practices the principals wanted (such as using Socratic questioning) and teacher-identified research projects chosen by each disciplinary team. Collaboration time would use processes similar to those that teachers had been

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implementing, and lead teachers would lead professional development workshops and provide ongoing support to teachers and leaders. The principal's priorities would be supported by training, classroom walk-throughs, and individual teacher support.

Reflecting on the outcome, the principal said he came to realize that teachers' expertise and experience were critical to successful PLC work. He viewed the teachers' expertise and status as an important resource in developing and implementing schoolwide PLCs.

**2. Differentiating Top-Down and Lateral Decision Making**

Distributed leadership reflects a change in thinking about school leadership. In long-held conceptions of leadership, a singular figure with charismatic and heroic qualities at the top of a hierarchy oversees the allocation of resources, builds and implements a vision, and makes decisions on behalf of the faculty and staff. This notion of a leader has proven unsustainable because schools are too complex for one person to lead independently and because exceptional leaders who have been able to singly alter school performance are the exception rather than the rule.

The most salient difference between schoolwide PLCs that employ distributed leadership practices and those that don't is in how individuals are involved in making decisions. Researchers of distributed leadership practices explain that leadership is more effective when it's stretched over knowledgeable individuals in an organization (Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond 2004). Schools with distributed leadership

have a flattened hierarchy because expert teachers and other leaders (such as coaches and specialists) are involved in making decisions about school improvement activities. Gronn (2008) uses the term heterarchy to describe this kind of power structure. In a heterarchy, leadership is shared laterally, and decisions are made by individuals who have both status and expertise in the community. Individuals in these positions have authority and are accountable for decisions and results. Because peers recognize this status and expertise, the larger community more readily accepts decisions about how work is envisioned and implemented. Teachers and leaders "synchronize their actions by having regard for their own plans, those of their peers, and their sense of the unit membership" (Gronn 2002: 231).

In the middle school, the mathematics and science teams took very different approaches to their work. The math team was drowning in data from high-stakes tests, benchmark assessments, classroom assessments on problem solving, and a host of other data sets. For those teachers, the path of collaborative inquiry involved looking at the entire mathematics program and matching student needs with available resources. The math team was highly collaborative and organized, and teachers shared leadership. Over two years, their research resulted in a recommendation to restructure classes and resources to increase support for struggling students, increase the rigor of problem solving across grades, and work with both the elementary and high school staff to construct a more coherent experience for students based on pedagogical and content standards. This team's decisions were taken to the principal and staff for consideration on how to change schedules and reapportion staff time based on student needs.

Science teachers faced distinctly different challenges. Data was limited because high-stakes tests in science were given every three years. Each grade level had different content standards, and teachers' buy-in to collaborative practices was uneven. For these teachers, collaborative inquiry consisted of collecting and sharing data related to students' ideas and engagement on specific topics. Teachers individually conducted research related to their own students, shared instructional practices and assessment results, and explored students' ability to communicate their understanding. After two years of struggling to find a way to gather and use data across grade levels, teachers began to explore how concepts were developed from unit to unit and grade to grade and to develop a format and use for formative assessment practices to better understand student thinking. The principal played the role of a colleague and critical friend. The principal met frequently with lead teachers to talk about how to support the team, enabled

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teachers to visit schools with successful science programs, and frequently sat in on collaboration time where his probing questions helped teachers think more deeply about data and student learning.

Distributed leadership means that teachers and other leaders recognize there is no one-size-fits-all model for developing teams. Simply gathering people together will not promote increased student learning. The work needs to be reinforced by high-quality professional development and focused on critical issues of practice in the context of what's reasonable and doable. Collaborative practice may involve all teachers considering the learning of students, as in the case of the mathematics group, or it might mean collaboratively looking at the needs of individual classrooms or students, as was the case with science. Leaders must be careful about identifying the team's learning needs, otherwise PLC work can easily default to implementation of compliance-oriented work sessions doing little to engage teachers, change classroom practices, or enhance students' learning experience.

### **3. Building Culture Through Dialogue and Inquiry**

Proponents of professional learning communities argue that all adults in a school have a collective responsibility to ensure each child has the opportunity to reach his or her full potential. Our research suggests that when the adults in a school continually engage in dialogue and inquiry to support student learning, a re-culturing takes place. A result of this re-culturing is that teachers take risks and tolerate a level of vulnerability in order to learn and enact productive change. For dialogue to work in the service of collaborative inquiry, team members must adopt and practice norms of collaboration. These norms become normal when members commit to them and regularly reflect upon them (Garmston and Wellman 2009).

For instance, we've worked with many groups that have successfully incorporated behavioral or procedural norms such as "Be on time" or "Come to meetings prepared." Even so, teams that use conversational or interpersonal norms for exploring data and ideas create richer and more productive collaborative dialogue. When adults take on a questioning and wondering stance toward student learning, individuals can press each other intellectually (Nelson et al. 2010). Conversations focus on topics such as student thinking in relation to student learning goals or probing students' misconceptions and partial understandings. Team members may ask, "What does it look like for a 7th grader to understand energy transformations?" or "This pile of papers from kids who

are almost there, what are they showing us they need?" Conversational norms also position teachers to inquire into the ideas of other members, such as "What do you think it means for 7th graders to 'get seasons?'" or "I teach volume differently. Why do you teach it the way you do?" or "When kids memorize words, do you think they understand the real meanings?"

### **Leaders who practice distributed leadership recognize the need to draw upon and build from the expertise of teachers.**

Teams exhibit a spirit of inquiry by continually asking questions of data and of each other. This kind of collaboration is synergistic, made powerful by individuals working in concert with one another to deepen their understanding of core instructional practices. One teacher described the work as shifting from focusing on "my kids" to focusing on "our kids." Collective thinking increases each teacher's capacity to make informed classroom, department, or school decisions to support student learning. As more people develop expertise and engage in this kind of dialogue and inquiry, the middle school continues building a culture where understanding the complexities of learning and teaching is the central focus of all collaborative work. This is not done by a few select leaders, but by the faculty as a whole.

### **CULTIVATING DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP**

School leaders and teachers don't simply decide to take a distributed leadership approach to working together. Some schools may be ready for shared responsibility, while others may need to build expertise, trust, and responsibility.

Navigating the balance between trust and accountability is challenging in this era of No Child Left Behind. Mandates and external pressures encourage prescribed programs and practices that focus on student achievement at the expense of promoting teacher professionalism (and some would argue student learning). In the middle school, leaders recognized that mutual accountability for student learning required a shift from external accountability systems to internal assessments and interventions supported by teachers. Leaders who practice distributed leadership recognize the need to draw upon and build from the expertise of teachers. Furthermore, by letting go of some of the control for making decisions related to PLC work, principals acknowledged that teachers have both agency and efficacy for guiding

**Teams exhibit a spirit of inquiry by continually asking questions of data and of each other.**

the work. Finally, by granting teachers a seat at the table, leaders acknowledged the importance of building a culture of open and honest dialogue.

In Silver Valley, principals gained critical insights about distributed leadership by participating in their own collaborative inquiry group that focused on supporting the teachers' PLC work. Through regular and ongoing meetings, four principals learned the challenges of determining a research question, clarifying what they wanted to know, collecting data, making sense of data, and enacting changes to practice based on conclusions drawn from data. They came to recognize the importance of using norms of collaboration to develop a shared vision and commitment for leading the professional learning of teachers in their buildings. They learned that distributed leadership is identifying and supporting internal and external intellectual and material resources for PLC work, knowing when to hold on and when to let go of authority, and deciding how to use inquiry and dialogue to build a culture of continuous improvement. The middle school principal realized he couldn't simply tell teachers what to do. Rather, teachers needed to lead and conduct their own learning just as he had done in the principals' PLC. Our research suggests that the principals' commitment to participating in their own PLC helped them understand the critical features of distributed leadership described here.

Based on our research, we've also found ways that principals and teachers can lay the groundwork for developing the prerequisites for distributing leadership:

- Consider who is afforded status in the school. Are the people with the most knowledge and expertise holding leadership positions and negotiating important decisions? How do you know?
- Anticipate variation across collaborative teams. There is no one-size-fits-all model for PLC work. Consider facilitation needs and strategies based on the unique characteristics of each teacher group.
- Build small-step opportunities to develop trust and to articulate and negotiate values and beliefs about teaching and learning. Provide opportunities for teachers to talk and learn from one another and from other experts.
- Accept that building professional learning communities can take months or years. Whether mandated or voluntary, teachers need time to develop knowledge and skills to effectively use a learning improvement cycle.

- Make dialogue and inquiry a normal part of the school culture. Learn about and practice using strategies that encourage and challenge individuals to press each others' thinking, ask high-level questions, and focus on student understanding and achievement.

Teachers can and ought to be the vehicle by which teacher improvement works, rather than being the object of teacher improvement (Lieberman and Miller 1990). By acknowledging and using teachers' knowledge and expertise, and by giving teachers different forms of leadership positions and control of their learning groups, their knowledge and expertise will grow and deepen. Teachers will begin to take the wheel and drive their own learning. As we reflect back on what we learned from our time with Silver Valley, we believe that leadership based on expertise that is broadly shared across a number of team members and focused on negotiated goals holds the greatest chance for sustaining schools as learning communities focused on student learning and achievement. **K**

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