TEACHER COLLABORATION IN PERSPECTIVE

CRITICAL QUESTIONS
for Superintendents and School Board Members

What roles can superintendents and school boards play in creating the conditions for teachers to work more collaboratively?

K–12 schools have not historically been expected to embrace or foster collaboration. Teachers often work in isolation, separated from other teachers, making it difficult to benefit from their colleagues' expertise or to share their expertise with others about how to help more students learn. This is sometimes described as the "egg crate" model of education. Approaches to organizing and improving schools that are focused only on individual teachers do not allow colleagues to help one another solve problems, share critical information about students, develop their abilities or make progress together on achieving schoolwide goals.

A growing body of research shows that getting beyond the egg crate can be helpful: When teachers work more collaboratively, student outcomes can improve, teachers can be more satisfied in their jobs and teacher turnover can decrease. In situations where teachers are already working together regularly, taking stock of how well that collaboration is functioning and how it might be improved or expanded can help to further advance teaching and learning.

A joint project of the Spencer Foundation and Public Agenda

PUBLIC AGENDA

Superintendents and school board members can use the following set of questions to begin to understand how teachers currently work in their districts and to think critically about how to make teachers' work more collaborative. These questions are designed to help superintendents and school board members:

- Ask good questions about how teachers work.

- Understand their own roles in creating the conditions for teachers to collaborate.

- Consider the concerns and needs of stakeholders in the district and community.

Addressing the questions outlined below will likely require collecting and analyzing data on issues such as teacher turnover, school climate and student outcomes. It will also likely require considering how teachers' work differs across schools, departments and grade levels. Most important, addressing these questions will require creating opportunities for teachers themselves to speak honestly about how to foster collaboration in their workplaces.

ASSESSING CURRENT PRACTICES

1. Currently, how isolating or collaborative are teachers' workplaces in our district's schools?

- How much do teachers feel they can learn from and support one another professionally?

- Do teachers work more collaboratively on some activities—such as planning curricula or supporting students—than on others?

- Do they work more collaboratively in some schools, grade levels or departments than in others?

- Why are some activities or settings more collaborative than others?

2. What formal and informal structures are currently in place in our district's schools to help teachers work together?

- How useful do teachers find current opportunities and systems for learning from one another and working together?

- What successes and challenges have schools and the district experienced in trying to help teachers learn, develop and work together?

3. Do principals in our district currently foster collaborative environments for teachers? Or do principals stymie collaboration?

- How safe do teachers feel in speaking up when they have a problem or idea?

- How receptive are principals to feedback and suggestions from teachers?

- How receptive are teachers to feedback and suggestions from principals?

4. What concerns do teachers in our district have about working more collaboratively?

- Do teachers worry about losing autonomy?

- Do teachers see working more collaboratively as a burden that would impinge on their other responsibilities?

- Who is left out, talked over or otherwise marginalized when teachers collaborate? Do teachers differ in how they adapt to and operate in collaborative settings by years of experience, gender, race, sexual orientation or other variables?

5. In unionized districts, how might relationships between labor and management affect efforts to make teachers' work more collaborative?

- Can the teachers' union serve as a social and professional network to foster collaboration and develop teachers' skills and content knowledge?

- How do current labor contracts create opportunities and challenges for teachers to work more collaboratively?

- How will the district engage union leaders regarding potential changes to teachers' schedules, roles, titles, career ladders or pay scales?

6. How will parents and students respond to the district's efforts to foster a more collaborative teacher workplace, and how should the district engage them?

- How much do parents need to understand about the district's efforts to foster a more collaborative workplace?

- Will changing schedules of the school day or year complicate parents' work and family commitments? Which parents will be most affected, and how will the district help mitigate those effects?

- Will changing schedules affect students' after-school activities, summer activities, jobs or family commitments? Which students will be most affected, and how will the district help mitigate those effects?

7. If the district sets out to foster more collaboration among teachers, what will be the district's, teachers' and principals' goals for doing so?

- How will the district, teachers and principals agree on shared goals of collaboration?

- How will we know if collaboration is helping to meet those goals?

- What data have been or should be collected to measure progress toward those goals?

- How patient can the district be in waiting to see progress?

- How can the district celebrate progress? How can it recover from setbacks?

8. How can the district involve teachers in making their workplaces more collaborative?

- What roles can teachers take in the district's efforts to help them build content knowledge, develop their skills and grow in their crafts?

- Which department chairs, union leaders or other teacher leaders could help advance this process or could hinder it? How should they be engaged?

- How can efforts to foster collaboration build on—rather than erase—existing practices and values in schools and the district?

9. What resources in time, space, funding and human capital will the district need in order to help teachers work more collaboratively?

- What skills and resources do principals, administrators, teachers and teacher leaders need to help teachers learn, develop and work together?

- Can schedules be arranged so that teachers have common, regular time to work together during the school day without undermining other responsibilities?

- Will the district need to hire any nonteaching staff, adjust staff's schedules or find other scheduling solutions so that teachers can work more collaboratively?