START SMALL DREAM BIG

Teachers, students, administrators, and parents come to each new school year full of fresh ideas and great expectations of success. Achieving the desired excellence requires commitment and innovation, as well as a willingness to consider fresh perspectives.

Every day, educators face a variety of decisions that can be enhanced through consultation with colleagues and others who are involved with education. For example:

One morning, the principal informs you that to meet the educational requirements for certain special-needs students, you will have to develop an instruction and assessment accommodations/modifications plan involving several classrooms . . . .

Your school is involved in a total-quality-management program, and you are assigned as the facilitator for partnerships between area businesses, parents, students, and staff . . . .

The curriculum is being redesigned, requiring all the teachers in your school or throughout the conference to work together, and you are included in the process.

Professionalism means seeking to acquire new skills, having a sense of curiosity, and a commitment to learning from others. Relationships with other teachers, administra-

> *The benefits of shared expertise are many, "since the sum of the parts is greater than the whole" and "none of us is as good as all of us."*

tors, parents, the community, teams/committees, and even students—all of these require and are enhanced by skills in collaborative communication.

Definition

Collaboration is a style of involved interaction between at least two equal entities that voluntarily engage in shared decision-making and creative problem-solving. It can be used in any educational activity.[1] A continuous and circular process, it requires assessing the situation, establishing objectives, identifying content, clarifying participant roles, developing a time line, defining the program, conducting formative/summative evaluations, and redesign.[2] Collaboration is necessary to respond to consumer needs, "to reshape square holes for round pegs," and to achieve ethical and moral outcomes based on exemplary practices.[3]

Advantages

The benefits of shared expertise are many, "since the sum of the parts is greater than the whole" and "none of us is as good as all of us." Educational experiences do not occur only in classrooms; community interactions and school partnerships can enhance student learning[4] and increase opportunities for professional growth.[5] Shared decision-making encourages participants to consider multi-

BY CANDICE HOLLINGSEAD AND GAIL ZAHN

ple viewpoints and to base their teaching on individual needs rather than a standardized, textbook-driven curriculum. Collegial school environments focus on individual learning and consistent, clearly understood expectations for each of the stakeholders of the school (parents, teachers, students, constituents, and administrators).[6]

Advantages of collaboration include:

• A better understanding of teachers' challenges and use of their talents across disciplines;

• Opportunities for all educators to receive on-the-job training for various instructional skills (i.e., task analysis, diagnostic assessment/instruction, and individualized curriculum modifications);

• Reduced teacher isolation;

• Creative problem-solving;

• A sense of shared purpose;

• A variety of perspectives on each problem; and

• A sense of shared purpose in providing education for all students, rather than "your" students and "my" students.[7]

Obstacles

Although the advantages listed above make collaboration sound like a panacea for school improvement, there are obstacles to overcome. Teachers report that increased involvement with students' needs can result in a loss of focus on long-term, schoolwide goals. Scheduling issues come to the forefront when teachers sacrifice individual planning for collaboration or when administrators co-opt teachers' free time to accommodate teamwork. The extra planning time required may reduce opportunities for peer observation and professional development. Teams of teachers involved in collaborative efforts can either (1) unintentionally create competition, resulting in resentment and discord; or (2) develop a sense of emotional bonding that makes them unwilling to deal directly with conflict. If they constantly solve problems through compromise, important issues may be ignored or swept under the rug.[8] Inevitably, during the collaborative process, conflict will arise, but using the techniques described in this article will help to ensure a successful outcome.

Keys to Success

Planning increases the likelihood of success. This includes:

• Defining a purpose (goal identification);

• Agreeing on a process (defining role, setting agendas, organizing the work, highlighting problems);

• Committing to communication (honesty, respect, valuing diversity);

• Ensuring involvement (acceptance, encouraging input);

• Valuing ownership (work load, problems, team identity, power structure); and

• Building trust (risk-taking and initiative).[9]

Focusing on potential resolutions, rather than personalities, can be very effective. For example, suppose a team is working together, and one or more of the individuals seem negative and difficult to communicate with. Staying focused on a mutually satisfactory solution or consensus-driven creative intervention can help keep the group from getting sidetracked by resentment or frustration.

Negotiation is another tool that can help groups explore solutions to problems. Professional interaction can trigger conflict. Careful consideration of each participant's perspective can aid in achieving resolution. Valuable tools to use in resolving difficult working relations are staying calm, taking brief notes on the discussion, considering all options, responding in paraphrase, and using questions to clarify the reasons for the conflicting points of view.[10]

Evaluation

Collaborative skills are developed through collective and individual self-examination. The following questions will help with this evaluation:

Are we meeting objectives?

Do we trust one another?

Are we actively listening?

Are our objectives realistic and challenging?

Do we use positive processes for conflict resolution?

Have we set group and individual performance standards?

Are our roles clearly defined?

Do we provide one another with positive, specific feedback?

Do we use feedback to achieve improvement?

Are we meeting our deadlines?

Have we avoided unfair peer criticism?

Do we focus on problems rather than on people?

Do we support one another?

Have we made our decisions through consensus?[11]

Recommendations and Ideas

A few final recommendations are (1) to define the problems precisely so you can assess your success in solving them; (2) reach consensus on goals and desired outcomes; (3) provide for ongoing training of participants; (4) enlist the support of organizational

Educators working together with parents can improve communication and trust, which in turn can lead to productive working relationships (Friend and Bursuck, 1999).

structures; and (5) design systematic approaches for evaluating processes and products.[12]

Collaboration can occur in various forms and settings, depending on the participants and their needs:

• Teachers who are specialists in various content areas at a school can collaborate to plan the instruction and curriculum for a student with learning disabilities.

• Teachers and parents can plan behavior management that is reinforced at home and at school.

• Educators and local church members can develop short- and long-range plans to involve children and youth in outreach programs as part of the religion curriculum.

Picture
Removed

- A teacher can engage in discussion with a classroom aide to clarify roles and responsibilities.
- Administrators may find it helpful to meet with a group of educators to design curriculum for a large school or a group of small schools.
- Teachers who are isolated from other educational professionals can participate in educational forums on the Internet to solve common instructional problems (i.e., Adventist Educational Forum: http://edforum. adventist.org/).
- Attending state or national conferences allows teachers to network with others in their profession.
- Local businesses can collaborate with schools to ease students' transition from school to work and to help students understand the demands of the workplace.
- University partnerships with K-12 schools can create opportunities for on-the-job training of student teachers.[13] (See the article by Prema Gaikwad in this issue.).

Teachers, open your doors, both physically and philosophically. Reach out to other student caretakers near and far. Encourage others to take an interest in the students under your tutelage. Look for opportunities to expand your horizons and increase your effectiveness and efficiency. Start small and dream big. You can accomplish anything you set out to do. Great things can result from professional partnerships! 🖉

Picture Removed

Candice Hollingsead, Ph.D., *currently is an Associate Professor at Minnesota State University in Mankato, Minnesota, where she provides graduate-level special-education teacher training and is the graduate coordinator for the learning-disabilities programs. She has contributed professionally in the areas of teaching, research, publication, and service to the field of special education for the past 12 years. As a public school special educator, Dr. Hollingsead provided services to students with learning disabilities and emotional/behavioral disorders in elementary, middle, and high school settings and* engaged in consulting, new teacher mentoring, and legal mandate monitoring compliance. She earned Master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Kansas in the areas of learning disabilities and educational administration and has provided Strategies Intervention Model (University of Kansas-Center for Research on Learning) training at local, state, and national levels. **Gail Zahn, Ph.D.,** is an Assistant Professor of Special Education at Minnesota State University and Graduate Coordinator for Emotional/Behavioral Disabilities Programs at the university. Dr. Zahn has more than 20 years of experience in this field, serving in both administrative and teaching positions, and holds a doctoral degree in educational leadership. She has provided training and consultation to school district personnel and state special-education departments across the United States in the area of policy development, strategies for the inclusion of students with disabilities, and functional behavioral assessment.

Picture Removed

REFERENCES

1. Marilyn P. Friend and William D. Bursuck, *Including Students With Special Needs: A Practical Guide for Classroom Teachers* (Boston, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 1998), pp. 72-107; Lorna Idol, Ann Nevin, and Phyllis Paolucci-Whitcomb, *Collaborative Consultation* (Austin, Tex.: Pro-Ed), pp.1-17.

2. William Stainback and Susan B. Stainback, *Curriculum Considerations in Inclusive Classrooms* (Towson, Md.: Paul Brookes, 1991), pp. 85-100; _____, *Controversial Issues Confronting Special Education, Divergent Perspectives* (Boston, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 1996), pp. 195-218.

3. Peggy A. Dettmer, Norma T. Dyck, and Linda P. Thurston, *Consultation, Collaboration, and Teamwork for Students With Special Needs* (Boston, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 1996), pp. 1-35; 99-122; Margo A. Mastropieri and Thomas E. Scruggs, *The Inclusive Classroom, Strategies for Effective Instruction* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 2000), pp. 37-71.

4. S. Kruse and K. S. Louis, "Teacher Teaming-Opportunities and Dilemmas," Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, Brief No. 11 (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1995.

5. Chriss Walther-Thomas, Lori Korinek, Virginia L. McLaughlin, and Brenda T. Williams, *Collaboration for Inclusive Education: Developing Successful Programs* (Boston, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 2000), pp. 1-50.

6. Idol, et al.

7. Marleen C. Pugash and Lawrence J. Johnson, *Collaborative Practitioners, Collaborative Schools* (Denver: Love, 1995), pp. 173-195.

8. Walther-Thomas, et al.

9. Development Dimension International, *Working in Teams* (1993).

10. Dettmer, Dyck and Thurston; Mark P. Mostert, *Interprofessional Collaboration in Schools* (Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 1998), pp. 116-139.

11. Development Dimensions International.

12. Walther-Thomas, et al.

13. Jodie Morse, "The New College Try," *Time* 156:27 (January 8, 2001), pp. 48-50.