Collaborative Meetings

WORKING TOGETHER TO INCREASE STUDENT LEARNING

CONTENTS

STATE OF ALASKA

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Alaska Educators:

I am pleased to share with you this guide, *Collaborative Meetings: Working Together To Increase Student Learning*, which is focused on student data. Produced by Alaska Comprehensive Center through Education Northwest in partnership with the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development (EED), this guide follows a similar format as the collection of resources in the previously published guide *Principal Walk-Throughs: A Tool for Alaska Instructional Leaders.*

Teaching and learning are enhanced by quality instructional leadership and collaboration. This guide and the accompanying DVD point the way to developing a collaborative school culture in which teachers base their instructional practices on the learning needs of their students. Specifically designed for teachers and principals in Alaska, these materials provide an overview, the research base, and tools to get started. On the DVD, Alaskan educators are using collaborative meetings to look at student-level data and student work as the basis for discussions and decision making regarding instruction.

These materials are tools you can use to promote effective instructional practices and increase student learning in your schools.

Sincerely,

Mike Hanley
Commissioner

INTRODUCTION

"The pursuit of knowledge is not a piece of content that can be taught. It is a value that teachers model. Only teachers who are avid, internally motivated learners can truly teach their students the joy of learning. The frequently espoused goal of lifelong learning for our students is hollow rhetoric unless the school is also a learning community in which teachers engage in meaningful learning activities."—Haberman, 2004, p. 52

A collaborative culture supports regular meetings of teachers who share responsibility for assessing needs and developing solutions that address all students' learning (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). Collaboration can drastically change how decisions are made and who makes them, allowing teachers to assume greater responsibility for their students' academic progress. Some models call for staff to direct curriculum decisions and student learning objectives, as well as the interventions necessary to help students who are struggling (Bell, 2001). Research has shown that collaboration is central to the success of high-achieving schools, and that schools experience schoolwide gains when they organize teachers into small groups, allowing for a significant amount of autonomy, and promote intentional, learner-centered decisions regarding pedagogy and instruction (Supovitz, 2002).

Collaboration among teachers can be a powerful tool for professional development and a driver for school improvement by providing opportunities for adults across a school system to learn and think together about how to improve their practice in ways that lead to improved student achievement (Brown University, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2004). But, Dufour and Eaker (1998) caution that unless collective inquiry, collaborative teams, an orientation toward action, and a focus on results become part of "the way we do things around here," efforts to create a community of professional learners will not be successful.

Many schools have adapted their schedules to ensure that teachers and other professionals have time for collaborative meetings to examine student data; critical friends groups to discuss pedagogy and theoretical issues; lesson study to collaboratively plan, observe, and analyze classroom lessons; and other types of professional learning communities. A nationwide survey of more than 5,000 teachers found that 69 percent of these teachers participated in "regularly scheduled collaboration with other teachers" and 53 percent participated in a common planning period with other members of their team (Parsad, Lewis, & Farris, 2001).

Unfortunately, teachers sometimes find that even when meeting times are securely protected, true collaboration is more difficult than anticipated. Some discover that meeting time is not used productively or does not have the hoped-for impact on teaching and learning. As a result, some teachers become frustrated and begin seeing collaboration as one more obligation that keeps them from doing their "real" work.

In some schools, teachers *appear* to be collaborating, spending time on committees and in meetings, but if they are not focused on the nitty-gritty issues of teaching and learning, they find that a deeper culture does not develop. And, even in schools with a successful culture of collaboration, it turns out that not all collaborations produce improvement in student outcomes. Until collaboration takes place within the context of the overall school goals and involves an open-ended, learner-centered dialogue about student performance and best practice, there will be no sustained improvement in student outcomes.

Over the years, research studies have focused on models of teacher collaboration, including professional learning teams, lesson study, action research, data teams, and looking at student work together. Based on the research literature, this guide was developed specifically to support Alaska educators' efforts to increase student learning by meeting together to collaboratively monitor the progress of their students, assess students' learning needs, and decide how to tailor instructional practice in response to those identified needs. The hope is that this collaborative focus on student learning

will enable Alaska teachers to develop and implement new content, strategies, and approaches that increase their effectiveness and their students' learning.

Accompanying this guide is a DVD that shows how four different Alaska schools use collaborative meetings. Through the DVD, educators can visit Ron Larson and Knik Elementary Schools in Wasilla; Merreline A. Kangas K–12 School in Ruby; and Robert Service High School in Anchorage. Each school has adopted collaborative meetings as a way to make teachers' practice more public, better meet students' needs, and learn from each other. The DVD was produced by Education Northwest through the Alaska Comprehensive Center for the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development.

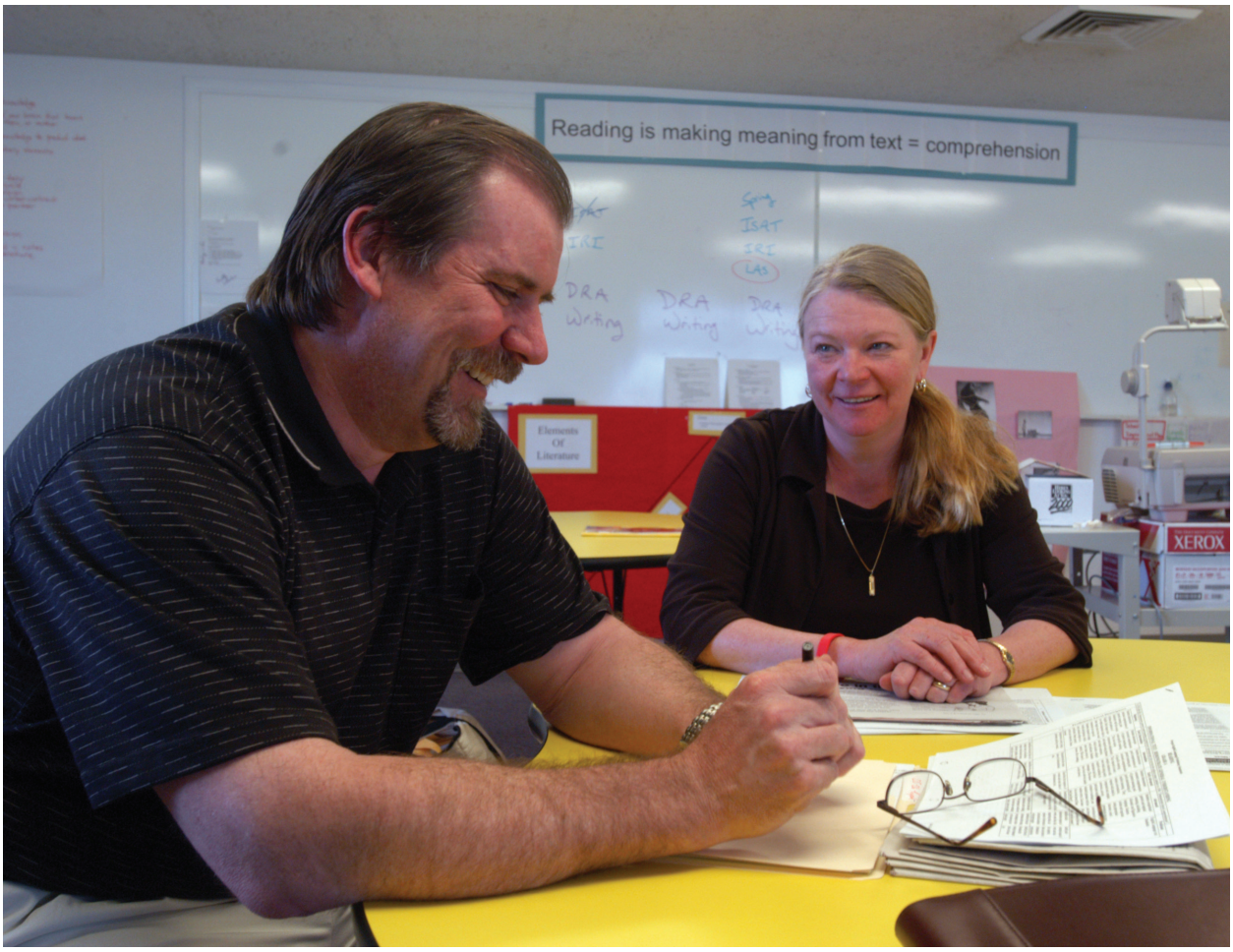
"When teachers are asked to commit themselves to a collaborative venture, they typically ask themselves three questions. First, they want to know if it will help their students. Second, they wonder if collaborating will make a positive difference in their teaching. And finally, they ask if they will receive adequate support for the work. If the answer to any of these questions is negative, teachers' support for collaborative work will not happen at all, or it will begin but quickly wane. The degree to which teachers value and invest in the collaborative process will determine the success of their collaborative enterprise."
—Grant & Murray, 1999, p. 193

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS: WHY COLLABORATIVE MEETINGS ARE AN IMPORTANT IMPROVEMENT TOOL

To impact student learning, teachers must "engage in structured, sustained, and supported instructional discussions that investigate the relationship between instructional practices and student work."—Supovitz & Christman, 2003, p. 1

Proponents of collaborative teacher models explain that when teachers shift their attention from the technology of teaching to the construction of learning, they approach their work very differently: They place student work at the center of the educational process and craft learning opportunities that respond to particular student needs. In this way, the goal of teaching becomes student outcomes (or measurements of what students learn and how they construct and apply knowledge) rather than teachers imparting specific skill sets. Under this condition, teachers make other transitions as well, including going from control to accountability; from managed work to leadership; from classroom concerns to whole-school concerns; and from a weak knowledge base to a stronger, broader one (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

Senge (1990) maintained that in modern organizations, teams, as opposed to individuals, are the primary learning units and that the individual members of teams grow more rapidly within successful teams than they would individually. In



their study of teacher teams in 47 schools, Katzenbach and Smith (1993) concluded that teams outperformed teachers working as individuals. They speculated that within the context of collaboration, teachers receive support, learn from one another, share their challenges as well as their successes, and gain confidence for changing their practice to better meet their students' needs. And, Talbert and McLaughlin (2002) found that teachers who collaborated on instruction are more likely to hold higher expectations for students and for their colleagues, to innovate in their classrooms, and to have strong commitments to the teaching profession.

Also attributed to collaborative teacher practices is an unanticipated cultural phenomenon: When collaboration is successful, teachers increasingly report a positive work environment, a sense of shared mission, and a stronger investment in both the decision making of the school and the sense of shared responsibility (Keiffer-Barone & Ware, 2002). Langer and Colton (2005) reported a collective efficacy—or a spirit of "we can do this together"—as a result of collaborative professional inquiry.

Based on a review of 43 studies, formative assessment was found to be at the heart of what teachers can do to most effectively impact their instruction. Evidence linked improved formative assessments to increases in student academic achievement at all levels. Quality formative assessments help low-achieving students and reduce the range of the lowest to the highest performing students. But to achieve this improvement, the results of the assessments have to be used to adjust teaching and learning practices at the individual classroom level. The examination of what teachers know about students and how they change what they do in the classroom to better meet the needs of students may be the only way to promote and sustain accountability in education (Black & William, 1998).

To develop a culture of collaboration, DuFour (2004) advised schools to make public what has traditionally been private, specifically their goals, strategies, materials, pacing, questions, concerns, and results. He suggested that every educator belong to a data team focused on student learning with time to meet during the workday throughout the year. He maintained that in order to attend to student results, educators should base their views of their own effectiveness on their students' results. The purpose of collaborative meetings should be an ongoing process of creating student-centered measurable goals and identifying the current student achievement via common formative assessments that correspond to the goals. The data generated should be collected, analyzed, and discussed, and ultimately serve as a catalyst for improved teacher practice (DuFour, 2004).

Fullan (2000) advised that each school or team must build its own collaborative model and develop local ownership through extensive process and reflection without a clear pathway laid out. He suggested that to navigate such a process, healthy school cultures must be cultivated, nurtured, and tended to by shaping assumptions, expectations, habits, and beliefs that constitute the norms of the institution and teacher teams. Supovitz (2002) defined the culture of instruction as one that continuously identifies, explores, and assesses instructional strategies to determine if they can make good on their promises.

"Collaborative conversations that center on topics such as 'what did my students learn recently and how do I know this,' and 'in what practices have I engaged that affect student learning' make conversations around 'I have these materials that might help you,' or 'have you considered this activity?' much more useful and acceptable among teaching colleagues." —Wayman, Midgley, & Stringfield, 2005, p. 5

GETTING STARTED: HOW TO INSTITUTE COLLABORATIVE MEETINGS

Creating a Collaborative School Culture

"A true collaborative school culture is based on mutual support, joint work, and broad agreement of educational values. Collaborative meetings provide teachers opportunities to meet in informal, small groups of colleagues using their own student data to talk and make meaning together without fear of being judged."—Champion, 2005, p. 62

Leadership, focus, and skill development are required to create a school culture in which instructional conversations that exemplify true collaboration take place. Teachers need a variety of structures, including time, leadership, resources, incentives, organizational arrangements, and ongoing professional development, to support their growth (Supovitz, 2002). Principals and other administrators must be capable and willing to provide the time and space for designated groups to meet. Most important, they must establish expectations for attendance and participation and reinforce the explicit purpose and instructional focus of each meeting—all the resources needed to guide the process of instructional conversations about data.

Teachers who work in schools with strong collaborative cultures behave differently from those in schools where they depend on administrators to create the conditions for their work. In collaborative cultures, teachers exercise creative leadership together and take responsibility for helping all students learn. Teachers learn to support one another's efforts to improve instruction and take joint responsibility for solving problems, accepting the consequences of their decisions. Teachers share their ideas and as one person builds on another's ideas, a new synergy develops. In a collaborative teaching and learning environment, educators evaluate new ideas in light of shared goals that focus on student learning (Kohm & Nance, 2009).

Through a system of professional inquiry, teachers are challenged to examine their beliefs about what students can do and to identify which teaching methods are working most successfully. Deeper insight is gained into the link between instruction and every student's learning, which serves to strengthen connections among instruction, curriculum, other aspects of school life, and student learning (Langer & Colton, 2005). Collaborative cultures build the confidence that teachers need to become instructional leaders. Collaborative decision making strengthens everyone's ability to set and meet high standards. Collaborative culture supports experimentation, risk taking, and feedback—all of which are necessary for reflecting on and improving teaching practice.

When school leaders and staff embark on creating a collaborative culture they are in essence developing an internal accountability system in which all share an explicit set of norms (see example norms for collaborative meetings below) and expectations about what good instructional practice looks like (Elmore, 2005).

Collaborative Cultural Norms

- Listen actively
- Build on what others say
- Expose/suspend your assumptions
- Do not step on others' talk; silences and pauses are OK
- Emphasize clarification, amplification, and implications of ideas
- Converse directly with each other, not through the facilitator
- Let the conversation flow without raising hands, as much as possible
- Make references to the data and encourage others to do the same
- Be aware of how often you speak and how much you say when you speak

Using Data Together

"Data are to goals what signposts are to travelers; data are not end points, but data are essential to reaching them—the signposts on the road to school improvement."—Schmoker, 1996, p. 36

Teachers participating in collaborative data cultures rely heavily on data-driven decision making. These teams of teachers search out, organize, and analyze data; prioritize needs; set and review annual goals; identify specific strategies to meet those goals; and determine performance measures or indicators to gauge results. Instructional improvement depends on a data-driven format in which teams identify and address areas of difficulty (Schmoker, 2003).

While collaborative teaming has been shown to be a positive force in supporting data use for improved educational practice, collaborative meetings can be difficult to implement. Some barriers are raised when collaboration is expected, but schools have not instituted the necessary systemic supports that facilitate effective meetings to look at data.

To establish a collaborative data culture and to help teachers make instructional decisions supported by student achievement data, schools and districts must encourage effective and consistent data use through investments in leadership and professional development and structured time for collaboration. It is crucial to provide professional development to help teachers, principals, and other school staff members obtain a thorough understanding of the data sources available and how to analyze and use those data to modify instruction.

While leadership, professional development, and time for collaboration do not establish the culture of data use, they do provide the supports needed to build a culture that fosters data use to guide instructional decision making.

When an entire school staff focuses on data analysis, it is to accomplish two purposes: to set student and staff learning goals and to monitor progress toward those goals. Both goal setting and monitoring are more effective when data analysis and interpretation occur at the school level. Getting the "big picture" from the data becomes the collective task of the entire teaching staff. But, analyzing student work and student data for the purpose of making instructional decisions about individual students is best left to the teachers of those students.

The expectation that teachers will analyze student-level data to determine whether their instruction has been effective presupposes that the data are readily available in appropriate formats and that the teachers have the skills to interpret them. Teachers need both appropriate data and analytical skills so they can rely on their interpretation of what is taking place in their classrooms.

When teachers are confident in their interpretation of data, they can engage each other in tough conversations about how their teaching impacts student achievement. Looking at student data is a concrete and direct way of making that connection. By charging teachers with developing solutions to the problems they have identified together from their own data, teachers begin to take the lead in framing what the instructional challenges are and how the school is going to address them. Teachers feel more control over their work.

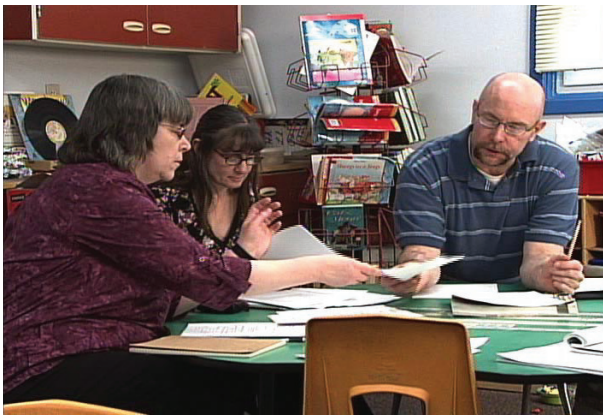
When a connection is made between teachers' control over their practice and their perceptions of their own effectiveness in teaching, they feel empowered to take responsibility for student learning.

Implementing Collaborative Meetings

Building data analysis into collaborative meetings helps educators move away from philosophy and preferential topic discussions to focus on what students actually need. At grade-level meetings, teachers discuss the learning needs of that group of children and the instructional practices of that group of teachers.—Domaradzki, personal communication, January 2011

Planning, organizing, and facilitating successful collaborative meetings focused on student data requires adherence to best practices in basic logistics, normative structures, facilitative skills, and established protocols for interpreting and discussing data (Domaradzki, 2011). (See Organizing and Facilitating Collaborative Meetings on page 13 of this guide.)

The most important support that grade-level teams of teachers require is quality blocks of time that are "set in stone" to discuss student performance and instruction geared toward producing higher rates of learning. When sacred time is set aside for this type of discourse, teachers view it as a demonstration of value and commitment for the collaborative process. It is crucial that the investment of resources for collaborative meetings is planned for the long term so teachers know that changes arising from in-depth collaboration can be sustained over time (Hord, 2004).



True collaboration among teachers is a complex process and there will be dilemmas, tensions, and challenges that emerge (Fullan, 2006). The manner in which teachers respond to those challenges can define both the effectiveness of the team and signify its future success or demise (Achinstein, 2002). Teams can begin the process on strong footing when they are provided the structures, protocols, and skills required to guide their process. A good first step for collaboration is establishing standard operating procedures and written group norms so that teachers know the expectations around attendance, roles, responsibilities, behavior, and purpose.

A well-designed agenda shows topic, purpose, guiding questions, and background or process. It focuses on results and must be based on learning outcomes and student needs. A results-oriented agenda is the most efficient and effective way to sustain focus on the stated purpose of the meeting and its expected outcomes. Further, a results-oriented agenda provides open time to analyze data, examine student work, score common assessments, discuss effective lessons, and talk about specific student needs across the grade level (Garmston, 2007).

A data-based discussion of student data serves as an impetus for staff to uncover individual student needs and engage in authentic dialogue about what those data reveal about teaching and learning in the school, at that grade level, or in that class. Working through the data sets is intended to clarify, build on, and enhance mutual understanding of the implications for professional practice. A

Guidelines for Using Data Effectively

- Whenever possible, display data graphically in a variety of user-friendly formats—bar graphs, scatter plots, and tables—and use more than one type of display
- Provide teachers with their own printouts that they can highlight and refer to over and over
- Be sure staff has training and support to interpret the data
- Look at strengths and celebrate them first, then ask the harder questions
- Provide guiding questions or ideas of what to look for in the data
- Work together to make the tie between data and the instructional program

From Sather, 2009

facilitator keeps the group focused on the data and gives participants an opportunity to extract different meanings and ideas and discuss important issues.

To keep the group focused on best practice, it is advisable to provide a structured approach to examining data. One tool that will help the group structure its conversations about data is a dialogue protocol (see Facilitating a Collaborative Meeting: Data-Based Dialogue on page 15 of this guide). This protocol specifies how talk time will be allotted to achieve specific aims, such as answering focused questions, presenting unique context, formulating clarifying or probing questions, or listening to and reflecting on feedback. Although teachers might feel awkward using the protocol and other tools at first, the benefits are substantial. Such tools formalize both the processes and the expectations of collaborative groups. They establish ground rules for participant interaction and can even accommodate potential distractions by allocating time for participants to voice concerns. They also help reassure participants that the investment of time will be worthwhile.

Like medical doctors, teachers engage in collaborative meetings to try to diagnose and develop treatment plans that result in the best outcomes for each student. Through the institution of collaborative meetings, teachers can share information, responsibility for key decisions, and accountability for the results. No matter how collaborative meetings are structured, they can serve as a powerful tool for improving student achievement because when the entire school community works together as a team—sharing a collaborative philosophy and a common vision for the best interests of all students—everyone succeeds.

How To Construct a Results-Oriented Agenda

- Identify the outcomes of the meeting and have outcomes that describe a product [not a process], offer the desired result, and offer evidence that the group has achieved its goals
- Sequence the agenda topics to launch the group into actions that are aligned with the meeting outcomes and guiding questions
- Plan an opening that sets the tone and enables participants to understand expected outcomes and processes
- Clearly label the purpose of any topic to clarify the group's role and expectations around decision making
- Construct engaging questions that encourage staff to probe more deeply into the topics under discussion
- Summarize information that staff members need before they respond to the guiding questions
- Describe any processes the group will use to accomplish each task
- Identify each person responsible for each task so there is time to prepare
- Indicate estimate of time required for each item on the agenda

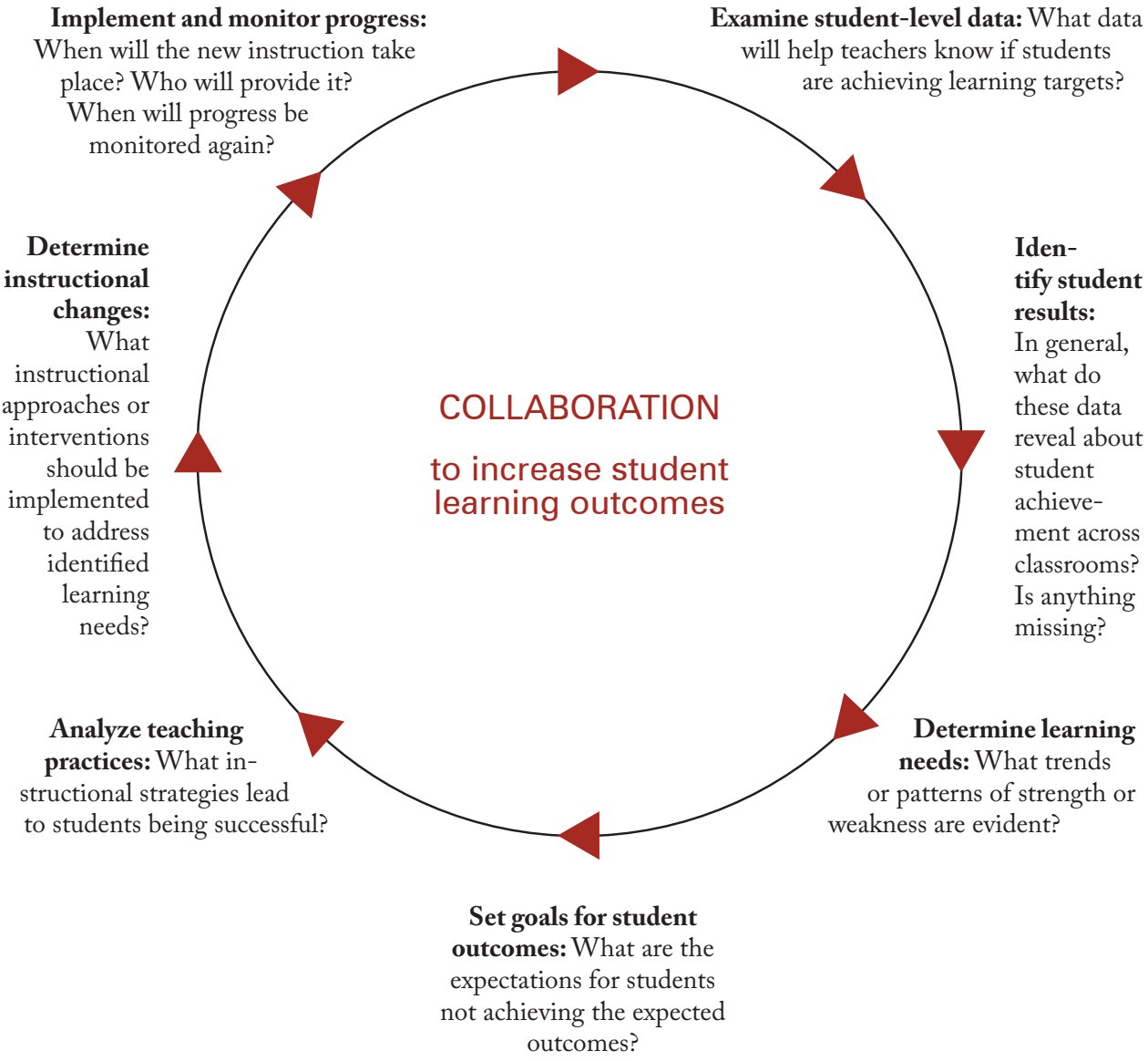
From Garmston, 2007

Questions To Consider When Examining Data

- What results do the data show me?
- What, if anything, surprised me about the data?
- What results was I expecting?
- How do the data reflect the content I covered in class?
- What do the data indicate the students are learning well?
- What skills and knowledge do the data indicate students are missing?
- Are students missing content because there are gaps in coverage due to pacing or sequencing?
- What do the data reveal about individual student strengths and weaknesses?
- What instructional interventions are indicated?

Collaborative Meetings: Process for Looking at Student Data

Collaborative teams increase the quality and effectiveness of their instructional practice and increase individual student achievement by consistently using protocols for looking at student data. Use the following approach to begin to dig deeper into student data.



Organizing and Facilitating Collaborative Meetings

Determine the logistics: Scheduling the meeting

- Is the day of the week set in stone (e.g., after school on Wednesdays, during late start sessions every other week on Fridays)?
- Is the time of day protected?
- Who is expected to attend every meeting and who will occasionally be included?
- Where will meetings be held?
- Have behavioral norms for interpersonal interactions been established?

Set the agenda: Planning the meeting

- What outcomes are expected to come from the meeting?
- What are the topics to be discussed?
- Are the topics aligned with the outcomes?
- What decisions on the topics are within the purview of the group?

Set the structure: Making each meeting productive

- Which teachers and other instructional staff should be included in the collaborative meeting?
- What is the intended purpose of this meeting?
- How long will each meeting last?
- How can the time be most effectively used at each meeting?
- How will we stay accountable for our time?

Keep it moving: Facilitating the meeting

- What is the appropriate pacing for this meeting based on expected outcomes?
- Who is designated as the facilitator for this meeting?
- Who is the timekeeper for the meeting?
- Do the attendees and the facilitator know their roles for keeping this meeting productive?

Build in data: Staying focused on student data

- Are we focused on actual student need?
- Are we learning how to improve, strengthen, or become more skillful as a result of this meeting?
- What are the data not telling us and where can we get what we need to know?

Adapted from Domaradzki, 2011

Providing Supports That Foster a Data-Driven Culture Within a School

Steps recommended by Doing What Works (excerpted from http://dww.ed.gov):

1. Understanding and knowledge—All district and school staff need a thorough understanding of how data are used to support instructional decision making. This understanding must then be combined with adequate knowledge and skills to use those data appropriately.
2. Essential elements—Schools can provide such supports as a data facilitator or coach, structured time for collaboration, and professional development. These supports can help schools build capacity among all staff for data use.
3. Facilitation—In order to encourage staff to use data effectively, schools can provide a facilitator or coach with expertise in using data and the ability to train and encourage other staff. Data facilitators can be district staff members who support multiple schools, full-time teachers who provide coaching to other staff, or a dedicated site-level staff person who supports all teachers in that school.
4. Facilitation duties—Data facilitators' duties include:
   - Modeling data use and interpretation using examples that relate to the school's learning goals
   - Demonstrating how a data-driven diagnosis of student learning issues applies to daily classroom practices
   - Assisting staff with data interpretation by preparing data reports and related materials
   - Training staff on how to use data to improve their instructional practices and, by extension, student achievement
5. Staff collaboration—Encouraging teachers to work collaboratively with data can highlight achievement patterns across grade levels, departments, or schools. A school culture that encourages collaboration in this way can promote consistency in instructional and assessment practices and expectations.
6. Structured time—Structured time can be set aside for staff to collaboratively analyze and interpret their students' achievement data and to talk about instructional changes. This time also can be used for professional development on data use.
7. Targeted professional development—In order for staff to learn to use data in a way that is consistent with school goals, schools and districts need to provide ongoing opportunities for professional development.
8. Professional development opportunities—Staff will need to develop new skill sets, ranging from data entry to data analysis to team leadership.
9. Easing into a new culture—Creating staff confidence in, and comfort with, a new data system can increase the chance that data will be used regularly and effectively to raise student achievement. Training should be implemented in small doses and occur close to the time that the data system is implemented, or before any system enhancements go into effect.
10. Specific training needs—It can sometimes be difficult to find professional development opportunities that are aligned with the specific needs of the school. With the assistance of the data team, schools can examine their needs and discuss them with their professional development provider.
11. Securing resources for success—Principals and district-level administrators can work to secure the fiscal and human resources necessary to ensure that staff understand how to interpret and interact with data.

Facilitating a Collaborative Meeting: Data-Based Dialogue

Using a data-based dialogue to capitalize on data serves as an impetus for staff to uncover individual student needs and engage in authentic dialogue about what the data reveal about teaching and learning in the school, at that grade level, or in that class. These are the suggested ground rules for facilitating the discussion.

Roles

- Staff members who share responsibility for particular data sets
- Facilitator: A teacher leader, with both a mastery of instructional practice and the credibility to lead the dialogue, keeps order using the ground rules
- Recorder: A team member who organizes the data and documents approaches and practices that emerge from the dialogue

Procedure (for a dialogue lasting 45–60 minutes)

1. Select the data. Depending on the composition of the data team, select targeted school, grade-level, or individual student data to examine.

2. Distribute the data. Before the meeting, distribute the data to participants.

3. Review the data (10–15 minutes). As the meeting begins, allow 10–15 minutes of group time to review the data. Participants may take notes, underline or highlight important elements, and record questions that the data raise.

4. Discuss the data (20–40 minutes). The facilitator presents a framing question to start the discussion and provides additional framing questions to keep the discussion going.
   Question 1—Agreement: What do the data tell us?
   Question 2—Aspiration: What needs to be accomplished?
   Question 3—Alignment: What is the gap between what the data tell us and our aspirations?
   Question 4—Adjustments: What interventions do we need to make?

5. Debrief (5 minutes). By grounding this process in the reality of the data, it becomes apparent that previous practices have not produced the desired outcomes. The group shares information and practices and sets an intervention plan. The facilitator closes the discussion and poses the following questions for open discussion:
   What did we learn?
   What new insights did we gain as result of this discussion?
   What do we need to do to improve the process?

Adapted from Learning Point Associates, 2007

COLLABORATING ON DATA USE

At Knik Elementary, third-grade teacher Heather Horton (second from left, back row) and her colleagues meet for 30 minutes each week to look at student achievement data.

Alaska teachers join together to study data and apply them in the classroom.

WASILLA, Alaska—First-year teacher Heather Horton relies on data to target instruction to her students' needs. But, when she gets stuck, Horton knows she can count on her colleagues at Knik Elementary School to help her make sense of the numbers.

Teachers at Knik, a grade 3–5 school with 400 students, dive into data together in a variety of collaborative teams. A Response to Intervention team meets every three weeks to examine progress monitoring scores of struggling students, while a positive behavior support team focuses on data around school climate. A leadership team, with a representative from each grade level, convenes biweekly to make decisions on school management issues. Grade-level teams get together weekly to analyze a range of assessment results.

Horton teaches third-graders in this suburb of Anchorage made famous by Sarah Palin. Every Wednesday afternoon at 3:30, she and the other third-grade teachers can be found in a small conference room off the front hallway, sharing

concerns and successes from their classrooms. Principal Traci Pedersen has arranged for substitutes and classified staff to handle bus duty so teachers have 30 minutes together within their contract day. For Horton, it's a time to feel less isolated and to tap into the experience of her peers.

"They have really helped me in looking at what data are important in terms of student movement, which types of data to look at if I have concerns about an individual student," she says. "They're really good at saying, 'Well, did you check this, have you thought about that?'"

For teachers throughout Alaska, collaborative meetings—particularly those centered on student data—are becoming more commonplace. The Alaska Department of Education & Early Development is promoting the practice as a way to open the doors of classrooms. Such meetings are "not just getting together and chatting about how the day went," notes Deputy Commissioner Les Morse, "[but] talking about hard data about student performance: understanding it together so you can determine what [am I] going to change about instruction tomorrow, based on what on what I learned about my students' performance today?"

A Cycle of Data Use

According to the Doing What Works (DWW) website sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education (http://dww.ed.gov), teachers can improve their ability to meet students' learning needs through a cycle of instructional improvement that revolves around data collection and use. The cycle includes:

- Gathering relevant data
- Interpreting the data and developing hypotheses about what's needed to help students improve
- Testing hypotheses through changes in instructional practice
- Assessing the impact of those practices

Teachers can enter the cycle at any point, and continue to add additional student achievement data. In a discussion of data collection, DWW acknowledges that it's necessary to collect data from multiple sources, because each type of assessment has its own limitations. "Results from annual statewide assessments can help teachers understand students' strengths and weaknesses, identify

"Maybe something worked really well with either a lesson or for a specific student," comments Heppner. "We want to communicate that as soon as possible so that we can see if it works again and again."

Teacher Aubrie Scott confers with Principal Annie Bill (left) at Larson Elementary, a Blue Ribbon Title I school. Bill believes collaboration among all faculty and staff is the key to being successful.

students who may need particular support, and set performance goals," the site states. However, there's likely to be a gap between when such assessments are given and when results are available to teachers. Interim assessments, administered by the school or district on a regular basis, help in comparing one classroom to another. But, they don't offer immediate feedback about student learning. However, classroom data drawn from tests, projects, homework, Individualized Education Plans, and parent conferences can provide "rich, detailed pictures of students' academic performance." The advantage of using this type of data is that it's readily available. On the other hand, it's not as easy to compare the results across classrooms.

DWW goes on to say that "both teachers and students benefit when data are interpreted collaboratively in grade-level or department-specific teams. Through collaboration, teachers can share effective practices, adopt common expectations for student performance, and develop a collective understanding of the needs of individual students."

At Knik, Principal Pedersen has found that collaborative teams can also use data to tackle problems that extend past one classroom. As an example, she cites her school's fourth-grade math data, which had dipped after Knik adopted a new program. "The team got together and said, 'We think we can do better,'" she recalls. "At that time we were teaching math by home room so it was a pretty heterogeneous group and a wide range of needs in one classroom." The team decided to implement "walk to math" and looked at several data points to place students in appropriate skill groupings. The result was a significant increase in state benchmark scores.

Supporting a Data-Driven Culture

To help teachers develop an understanding of how to use data, district and school leaders need to provide certain supports. Structured time is one of the key components of developing a data-driven culture. While Knik's Pedersen frees up teachers during bus duty, Principal Annie Bill at neighboring Ron Larson Elementary has taken a different tack. She asks teachers to dedicate one planning period a week to meetings, and she enlists clerical staff and "special" teachers such as the librarian, music teacher, and physical education instructor to

Knik Elementary Professional Norms and Responsibilities

- Be present means the speaker has our full attention. Be actively engaged and listen actively. Side bar conversations are inappropriate.
- Stay focused and on time. Stick to the agenda. Focus on relevant issues and avoid gripe sessions. Use timekeepers and a "parking lot" when needed.
- Disagree respectfully. Hold off on judging ideas during brainstorming.
- Everyone participates. Encourage others to ask questions and share ideas.
- Avoid interrupting others or dominating the discussion.

help with team teaching for interventions. "I think collaboration is the key to everything, so if we're not working as a team—the whole school, all the faculty, support staff—we can't be successful," Bill observes.

Bill herself often attends meetings that focus on reading interventions and other supports for students. She'll examine scores with the grade-level teachers and literacy coach, and add her own observations or information gained from interactions with family members. "Mrs. Bill has a different insight to our school as a whole," says fifth-grade teacher Natalie Heppner. "She is in different classrooms and she deals with the kids at different times. She also deals with parents, and it means she has an understanding of students' backgrounds, and if that's appropriate to share, I have that understanding, too."

Heppner has students in common with her teaching partner Aubrie Scott, who occupies an adjacent classroom. Heppner teaches all students science and Scott teaches social studies; they mix their students for reading and math by skill levels. Consequently, they confer on an almost daily basis about what's working and what's not. "Maybe something worked really well with either a lesson or for a specific student," comments Heppner. "We want to communicate that as soon as possible so that we can see if it works again and again."

At weekly meetings with the other fifth-grade teachers, Heppner and Scott will discuss students who are already receiving extra support and identify new students to keep their eye on. "That's where we start off the meeting," says Scott. "These are the kids we're helping and this is the progress they're making or not making. Do we need to adjust what we're doing, do more, or can we take some of it away? Just two weeks ago, our AIMSweb math scores came out and we saw what needed to happen. We know what supports we have, so then we are able to put them in place right away."

In addition to structured time for collaborating around data, schools and districts may need to provide professional development and a data facilitator or coach. Lexie Domaradzki helps Alaska teachers and administrators through trainings sponsored by the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development. She advises schools to set expectations of attendance and specify norms for collaborative meetings, as well as establishing the structure for the meetings (see sidebar for norms at Knik Elementary). "If it's a grade-level meeting, the purpose is to discuss that group of children or instruction of that group of teachers," she says. "If it's a cross-grade level collaborative meeting, that's usually about articulation up and down the system." The facilitator needs to keep the meeting moving in a productive way. And, Domaradzki adds, it's essential to build in data. "It helps you move from philosophy and preferential topic discussions to things that students actually need," she says. "So, when we think about collaboration, we should be collaborating about those areas in our profession we need to improve, strengthen, or become more skilled so our kids benefit."

Fifth-grade teacher Natalie Heppner draws on test scores, classwork, classroom observations, and advice from her fellow teachers to adapt instruction to each pupil's needs.

Teachers and administrators at Knik Elementary follow a set of agreed-upon norms or protocols in collaborative meetings. Among the agreements are "stay focused, be actively engaged, and disagree respectfully."

Small School Collaboration

Collaboration can come in all sizes. The K–12 Merreline A. Kangas School in Ruby has just 34 students, 99 percent of whom are Alaska Natives. Even in this remote Athabascan village along the Yukon River, the school's three teachers (one of whom is also the principal) gather for collaborative meetings once a week for one hour. Often, other staff, district visitors, and even community members are invited to take part.

In late spring, Principal Anne Titus and teachers Tami Thompson and Scotty Starr use their meeting time to examine students' state assessment results for reading, math, and writing. "We use that for our plan for improvement for the year," says Titus. "Then, we revisit it in the fall and that gives us a direction for our lesson plans and what we're going to teach. And then, we revisit it after Christmas because we want to use the time from January to the end of March to focus on testing skills and materials."

It's a formula that's apparently working. For each of the last five years that Titus has been principal, Kangas School has made adequate yearly progress. Deputy Commissioner Morse thinks other small Alaska schools can also benefit from holding collaborative meetings, just as their larger peers do. "Most of our small schools have one, two, or three teachers and when you begin looking at how we can work across grade levels and give one another good feedback, it opens the door to every teacher that is there. Often we have office staff, instructional assistants, [and] those people should be built into that collaborative work because they will gain in terms of their knowledge."

With teachers, staff, and administrators all working together, schools and districts can build their capacity to mine data confidently and effectively to help inform classroom practice.

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ABOUT THIS VIDEO

The 15-minute video accompanying this guide shows collaborative teams from three Alaska schools in action and also offers tips on how to implement such a practice in your own school.

As you view the video, here are some questions you may want to think about:

1. At Larson Elementary School, collaborative meetings home in on progress in reading, mathematics, and behavioral issues. What areas are most important for your school to focus on?
2. Knik Elementary School's principal arranges for substitutes and classified staff to supervise after-school bus duty one day a week to free up time for teachers to meet. What strategies might your school use to make time for collaboration?
3. Teachers at small and remote Merreline A. Kangas School invite front office staff and community members to attend their weekly collaborative meetings. Whom might you include in your meetings on an ongoing or occasional basis? What could they contribute to the process?
4. At Robert Service High School, teachers in the Freshman Academy meet in groups that represent a variety of subject areas. How should your meetings be structured: by/across grade level, subject, or a combination of these configurations?
5. What supports are needed to help teachers at your school become more confident and skilled at analyzing data and applying the findings in their classrooms?
6. Would drawing up a written set of norms help you stay on track at meetings? How would an outside facilitator contribute to your team's effectiveness?

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