

Remodeling Literacy Learning

Making Room for What Works



NATIONAL CENTER FOR
LITERACY EDUCATION

NCLE



Contents

Introduction	1
Who we are	2
Why this survey	3
Survey methodology	4
What we found	5
Key Findings	7
1. Literacy is not just the English teacher's job anymore	8
2. Working together is working smarter	11
3. But schools aren't structured to facilitate educators working together	13
4. Many of the building blocks for remodeling literacy learning are in place	15
5. Effective collaboration needs systemic support	20
Implications for Remodeling Literacy Learning	23
NCLE's role in remodeling	24
Policy recommendations	26
Appendixes	31
Appendix A: NCLE Framework for Capacity Building	32
Appendix B: NCLE's Stakeholders	33
Appendix C: Respondent Demographics	34
Endnotes	35



Introduction



Who we are

The National Center for Literacy Education is a coalition of thirty professional education associations, policy organizations, and foundations united to support schools in elevating literacy learning. Through support for practice, research, and policy change, we are building a movement around the power of educator teams to advance literacy learning. Effective collaborative inquiry teams build sustainable capacity in schools by giving teachers skills, structures, and support systems to continually learn from and refine their shared practice. NCLE's portfolio of free resources supports and connects educator teams in collaborating across subject areas and school walls to meet student literacy needs, while building accessible knowledge about effective team practices. By using the digital tools available today, combined with the expertise and infrastructure of our stakeholder organizations, we are building a living network to foster the literacies of tomorrow.

To find out more and to join the movement, visit us at www.literacyinlearningexchange.org.

Why this survey

Today there is growing agreement that literacy is at the center of all learning. Expectations for what it means to be literate are rising, and all educators must play a role in helping students meet these expectations. The new Common Core State Standards (CCSS), recently adopted by forty-six states and the District of Columbia, require the more complex literacy skills that all of today's students need to be college and career ready. With new standards in place, attention is now turning to how states, districts, and schools are organized to implement them. Given the changes that all schools will need to make, hearing directly from teachers at the grassroots level about how they are learning and working together to make the standards a reality in their classrooms is more important than ever before.

To that end, NCLE conducted a nationally representative survey of educators of all roles, grade levels, and subject areas to find out where we stand as a nation in the following areas:

- How do various kinds of educators see their role in supporting literacy learning?
- What kinds of training and resources do they have to carry out that role, and what do they find most useful?
- To what extent are schools structured to allow educators to work together to elevate literacy learning?
- What building blocks for professional collaboration are already in place?
- What supports are needed to make professional collaboration effective in improving student learning?

This report provides an overview of our findings in these areas and concludes with our analysis of opportunities to move forward. NCLE's mission is to support schools in working together to meet rising literacy expectations. To build a knowledge base for action, it is critical to have up-to-date data on how schools are currently taking on the challenge.

Making sure that our nation has a workforce that is well prepared with the literacy skills needed for the jobs of tomorrow is no small task. For individual teachers, who currently spend almost all of their time working alone in their classrooms, it can seem overwhelming. But collectively, the efforts that US educators are making could be much more powerful. It just makes sense to work together—for educators to pool their skills, resources, and expertise to meet this challenge.

For this to happen, however, some of the basic structures of schools—how they use their time and human capital—may need to be remodeled. We use the metaphor of “remodeling” throughout this report because we believe that while the infrastructure of US schools is sound, some changes are needed to make the design of schools more modern and efficient, to suit the way we live and learn today.



Given the changes that all schools will need to make, hearing directly from teachers at the grassroots level about how they are learning and working together to make the standards a reality in their classrooms is more important than ever before.



Our goals were to establish a national baseline for the use of effective professional collaboration around literacy learning and to document the most critical needs.

Survey methodology

Development of NCLE's "National Survey of Collaborative Professional Learning Opportunities" was guided by the research question "How can we create and sustain the conditions for the kind of professional learning that research tells us has an impact on student achievement?" Our goals were to establish a national baseline for the use of effective professional collaboration around literacy learning and to document the most critical needs.

Specific questions were developed based on our review of the literature on effective professional learning and particularly collaborative practices among educators that have been shown to have an impact on student learning. Multiple drafts of the survey instrument were reviewed by the diverse professional organizations within our membership and then pilot tested among targeted role groups: classroom teachers representing various grade levels and subject areas, librarians, literacy coaches, and building administrators.

We contracted with the social science research firm Survey Sciences Group (SSG) of Ann Arbor, MI, to consult on technical survey design issues, conduct online programming and testing, and administer the survey. The survey was conducted in October 2012 using a direct email contact to online survey method. Using a comprehensive list of K–12 educators provided by Market Data Retrieval (MDR) as a sample frame, we initially tested the frame for comparability with our expectations of what constituted the population of educators we were interested in studying. We found that the MDR data reflected the same characteristics as what we would expect to see in the population, so we proceeded with it as our sample frame. Using scientific sampling procedures, we randomly selected a sample from our frame, using data provided to maintain key characteristics, including grade levels taught, subjects taught, years of experience, and school characteristics in the desired proportions. As a result, we were able to select a diverse sample which was representative of the national frame we had selected for this study.

The survey completed with 2,404 eligible respondents, which represented a response rate of 3.99%. While this response rate is in the expected range for such a sample frame, it is important to note that we evaluated the data for possible nonresponse bias. Evaluating educators on the characteristics used during sample selection, we determined that the respondents continued to match demographically well with the original sample frame. Thus, while any data user should consider the impact of nonresponse bias in any analysis, we feel that this study maintains a level of error that is low, and consistent with other studies of this kind. Respondent percentages by subgroup are reported in Appendix C.

What we found

Key findings from the survey, explored in more detail in the body of the report, yield the following conclusions about how US educators are currently working together to meet rising literacy expectations and how best to support them going forward.

FINDING

1

Literacy is not just the English teacher's job anymore

The results of this survey demonstrate that the education profession is taking shared responsibility for developing deeper student literacy. Educators from all roles, grade levels, and subject areas agreed that literacy is one of the most important parts of their job. Our results also show that schools are investing in teacher capacity to develop student literacy, and not just with their elementary and English teachers. Teachers also feel they need to learn more about specific topics including Common Core, differentiating instruction, and content area literacy in order to prepare their students to meet rising literacy expectations.

FINDING

2

Working together is working smarter

Educators in our survey reported that their most powerful professional learning experiences come from collaborating with their colleagues. These responses strongly reinforce recent research findings on what kinds of professional development pay off for student learning.

FINDING

3

But schools aren't structured to facilitate educators working together

Most US schools are not structured to support the kinds of professional collaboration that educators report are so important in strengthening their practice. The amount of time US educators have for collaboration is small and shrinking.



Educators in our survey reported that their most powerful professional learning experiences come from collaborating with their colleagues. These responses strongly reinforce recent research findings on what kinds of professional development pay off for student learning.



Our data also highlight the crucial role that principals and other school leaders play in facilitating effective staff collaboration by modeling and providing tools, training, and time to support it.

FINDING

4

Many of the building blocks for remodeling literacy learning are in place

Despite the limitations of traditional school structures and schedules, the NCLE survey identifies some promising trends and practices for capacity building around complex student literacy that already exist in US schools:

- Basic collaborative structures such as grade-level, subject-area, and data teams are in place in most schools.
- Educators are using digital tools to build professional networks online.
- Many educators value professional collaboration enough to participate on their own time.
- Use of student data to ground collaborative work is common.
- Collaboration is supported by the specialized skills of literacy coaches and librarians.

Taken together, these findings suggest that individual teachers and administrators are committed to moving student literacy forward, but the system is not well set up to use their contributions effectively.

FINDING

5

Effective collaboration needs systemic support

Data from our survey show that schools where collaboration is the norm reap a host of benefits, including higher levels of trust and the quicker spread of new learning about effective practices. Our data also highlight the crucial role that principals and other school leaders play in facilitating effective staff collaboration by modeling and providing tools, training, and time to support it.



Key Findings



FINDING

1

Literacy is not just the English teacher’s job anymore

The education profession is taking shared responsibility for developing literacy learning

Responses from our nationally representative sample of over two thousand PreK–12 educators demonstrate that the strong majority of US educators understand and embrace that literacy is at the core of every subject area. When asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement “Developing students’ literacy is one of the most important parts of my job,” 76.7% of the total sample agreed or strongly agreed.

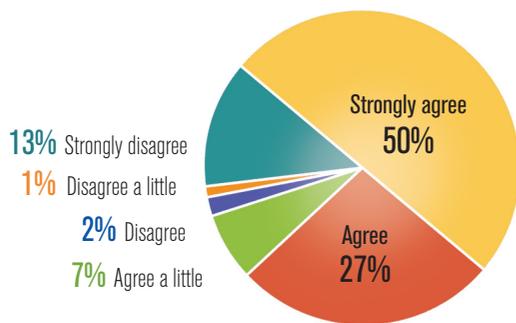
Even more significantly, this level of responsibility for student literacy held up across grade levels, subject areas, and role groups in the profession. In fact, other educators (for example, librarians and principals) are even more likely than classroom teachers to agree that literacy is one of the most important parts of their jobs.

This view of the centrality of literacy is held not just by elementary school teachers and English language arts (ELA) specialists. Levels of agreement among teachers specializing in the natural and social sciences, most of whom work at the secondary level, were almost as high.

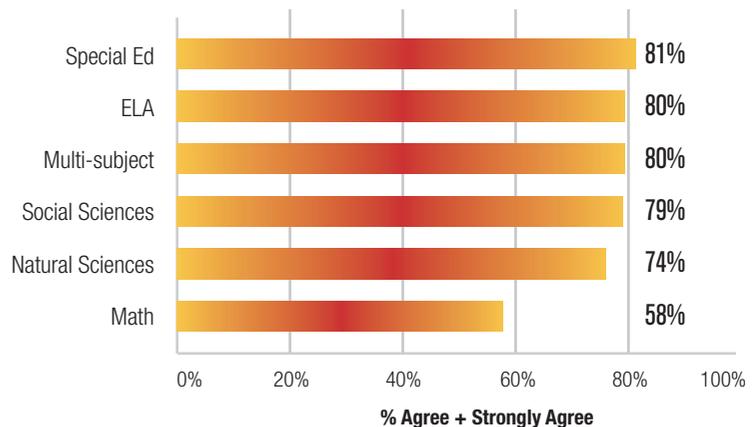
Having embraced that shared responsibility for developing student literacy, survey respondents also told us what kind of training they get now and what kind they need in order to help students meet elevated literacy expectations across the curriculum.

“Developing students’ literacy is one of the most important parts of my job.”

Percentage of agreement among the total sample



77% of the total sample agreed or strongly agreed
This chart shows agreement by subject area



Educators are eager for learning opportunities that will help them support higher student literacy

Classroom teachers in our survey reported participating in an average of 37.2 hours of professional learning related to literacy over the past twelve months. Among specific literacy topics, reading received the most attention (10.9 hours), with content area literacy (9.5 hours) close behind. Not surprisingly, teachers who are ELA specialists reported the most professional learning around literacy (50.4 hours), but specialists in math, science, and other content areas also reported an average of 28 hours or more of professional development related to literacy. This suggests that schools are investing in teacher capacity to develop student literacy, and not just with their elementary and English teachers.

Looking forward, we also asked respondents what additional professional learning around literacy they saw as most crucial to meeting their students' literacy needs. Respondents were presented with a list of thirteen literacy topics and asked to choose the 3 highest priorities (they also had the option to nominate their own topics). Five topics emerged as the highest priorities for additional professional learning to meet student literacy needs, with at least 30% of respondents selecting them among their top 3:

- Common Core
- Reading instruction
- Differentiating instruction
- Writing instruction
- Content area literacy

Reading and writing of course remain central to meeting students' literacy needs. But educators are telling us that they also need an in-depth exploration of the new Common Core standards their students will soon be expected to master. And as educators are starting to understand, those standards raise the bar both for literacy in the content areas and for differentiating instruction to meet the needs of all learners.

Looking at different sub-populations of educators, librarians and principals place a particular emphasis on professional learning focused on the Common Core, with 50%+ of those two groups selecting it as a top 3 learning priority, compared with 35% of classroom teachers. Elementary teachers also prioritize Common Core more highly than teachers as a whole, while middle and high school educators strongly emphasize content area literacy. All in all, the learning priorities expressed by US educators demonstrate a clear understanding of the transition under way in literacy and an acceptance of responsibility to deepen their own learning to help their students reach elevated expectations for literacy.

Educators have told us very clearly what they need to learn more about in order to meet their students' literacy needs. Equally important is how that learning happens.



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Literacy skills that were once expected of only top-tier graduates are now needed in almost any workplace.

CHANGING LITERACY EXPECTATIONS

Expectations for what it means to be literate are rising.¹ To meet the demands of tomorrow's world, today's students need to be able to interpret and use a wide variety of information and texts and to be adept at using them for problem solving, analysis, and collaboration. Literacy skills that were once expected of only top-tier graduates are now needed in almost any workplace. In addition, skillful literacy today encompasses habits of mind such as curiosity, engagement, and flexibility.² These skills are embedded within and across traditional subject areas to the extent that being literate is foundational to every subject. The centrality of these boundary-crossing 21st century literacy skills has deep implications for how schools are structured and how educators work together day to day to meet student needs.

The new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) reinforce this shift to a more complex set of literacy skills, increasing the demand on educators to work together to develop student literacy. The standards document highlights "Shared responsibility for students' literacy development" as one of its core design principles, citing extensive research on the need for college- and career-ready students to be able to use complex texts in multiple contexts.³ At their very core, then, these new standards require that teachers across all grades, and especially across the various disciplines, collectively assume responsibility for elevating literacy learning.

Increasingly, the literacy practices that students use in one subject are likely to be further developed and employed in another. Sophisticated strategies for close analysis of text or composing in new and changing genres are as likely to be demanded of students in the STEM areas as in the humanities. The past few decades have seen an explosion of knowledge and best practices about how to develop literacy within specific disciplines such as science and history. The more teachers have access to the best ideas about developing student literacy, and the more those complex literacy skills are reinforced consistently across the curriculum, the more students will be prepared to take up their roles in our workforce and our communities.

The stakes for our nation are high. A 2012 analysis of how countries around the world are updating their education systems for the digital age observes that "computers and machines can cost-effectively do the sorts of jobs that people with only routine knowledge and skills can do." In turn, this shift raises the demand for "workers who can add value through applying non-routine, complex thinking and communication skills to new problems and environments."⁴ As times change, our education systems must change with them if we are to move forward as a country.



FINDING

2 Working together is working smarter

Collaboration is the most valued form of professional learning

There is an emerging consensus among education researchers and practitioners that for educator learning to have an impact on classroom practice and the achievement of students, it must be sustained, collaborative, and closely embedded in the day-to-day work of teaching and learning.⁵ Respondents to our survey reinforced these themes. When asked to identify the single professional learning experience that had the greatest impact on their own practice in the previous twelve months, the top choices were formats with a high degree of hands-on participation, collaboration, and choice by the learner. The chart below shows six (of sixteen listed) learning experiences that were selected as the most impactful by 5% or more of respondents.

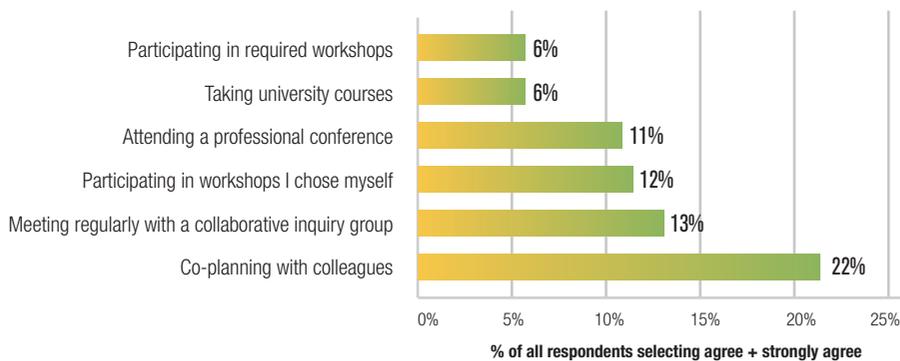
Collaboration works because it allows educators to tap the expertise of their colleagues

The NCLE survey also asked educators what made the professional learning they selected as most powerful so impactful. Respondents could select up to 3 from among fourteen choices plus an open “Other” category. Among those choices, the chart below shows the 4 that were selected by more than 25% of the respondents.



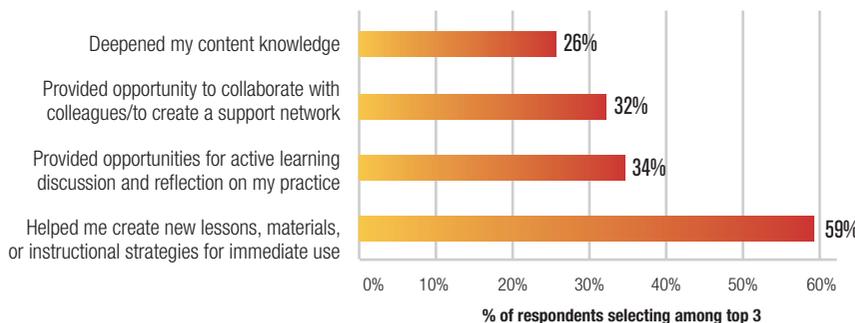
When asked to identify the single professional learning experience that had the greatest impact on their own practice in the previous twelve months, the top choices were formats with a high degree of hands-on participation, collaboration, and choice by the learner.

Most Valuable Professional Learning Experience During Previous Year



Building administrators are particularly likely to find learning through collaborative inquiry powerful: 41.9% of them selected that option as the single professional learning experience with the greatest impact on their practice.

Reason Why Learning Experience Impacted Professional Practice



Educators find professional learning most powerful when it affords them the opportunity to actively exchange ideas with colleagues and test them in their practice immediately. Educators are telling us very clearly that they learn the most from hands-on collaboration, playing out in the real context in which they work, making it crucial to understand how much opportunity current school structures give them to engage in such work.

Compared to other nations that outperform the United States on international assessments, American teachers spend much more time teaching students and have significantly less time to plan and learn together.

RESEARCH SUPPORTS THE POWER OF COLLABORATION

US classroom teachers practice their craft in isolation, compared both to how other professionals function and to the working conditions of teachers in other developed nations. The 2009 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher finds that US teachers spend an average of 93% of their official workday in isolation from their colleagues.⁶ Compared to other nations that outperform the United States on international assessments, American teachers spend much more time teaching students and have significantly less time to plan and learn together.⁷ The United States is particularly far behind in providing public school teachers with the kind of high-intensity, job-embedded collaborative learning that research shows is most effective in changing practice and improving learning. A 2010 report by the international consulting firm McKinsey and Co. identifies characteristics of school systems around the world that have demonstrated consistent improvement. One trait that all of the systems studied have in common is that teachers share and work on their practice together, “becoming learners of their own teaching.”⁸ Similarly, scholar Michael Fullan identifies “collective

capacity” built through planned collaboration as the “hidden resource” that US school systems have neglected to cultivate.⁹ A five-year study of 1,500 schools undergoing “major reforms” found that schools in which active professional learning communities (PLCs) were part of the improvement strategy saw decreases in student absenteeism and the drop-out rate and increases in student achievement in all content areas. Sites where the PLCs demonstrated specific effective practices and norms for collaboration, such as shared purpose and collective responsibility for student outcomes, were found to be particularly powerful in closing achievement gaps.¹⁰ A recent report from the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future summarized a decade of National Science Foundation research on teacher effectiveness as follows: “We now have compelling evidence that when good teachers team up with their colleagues they are able to create a culture of success in schools, leading to teaching improvements and student learning gains. The clear policy and practice implication is that great teaching is a team sport.”^{11 12}



FINDING

3 But schools aren't structured to facilitate educators working together

The amount of time educators have for collaboration is small and shrinking

Given the clear message from both researchers and practitioners about the power of professional collaboration, it is important to understand the extent of opportunity for collaboration currently available in US schools. In order to determine how much time educators currently have to work together, we asked survey respondents for a weekly estimate of how much time they spend working in structured collaboration, excluding administrative duties, which were defined as activities such as scheduling, ordering materials, or planning field trips. Less than one-fourth of the classroom teachers in our survey reported that they spend more than 2 hours per week working in structured collaboration with other educators. On the other end of the spectrum, almost one-third said they had 30 minutes or less for collaboration built into their work week. This suggests that while basic teaming structures do exist in most schools, the actual amount of time educators have to work together is minimal.

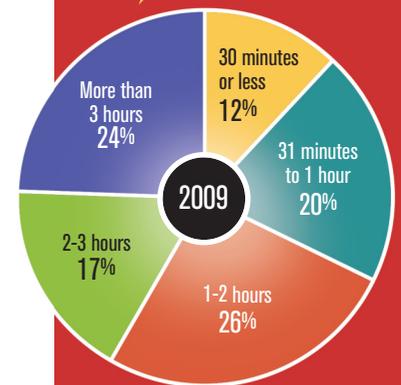
Because the need for educators to work together is rising as literacy expectations for students rise, we were interested in finding out not just how much time US educators have for collaboration now, but what the trend is. The measure of collaboration time in our survey was used in the 2009 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, which had a special focus that year on professional collaboration. This allows us to compare our 2012 data to their 2009 baseline (see charts at right).

This comparison shows a disturbing trend, with the percentage of teachers having virtually no opportunity for collaboration (30 minutes or less per week) more than doubling from 12% to 28% and the percentage with more than 2 hours shrinking from 41% to 24%. Both surveys were conducted with nationally representative samples. Given that the intervening years were marked by severe pressure on state budgets and teacher layoffs in many parts of the country, it appears that time for educators to work together was considered a "luxury" that could be cut in lean times. Unfortunately, by undermining schools' collective capacity to meet rising literacy expectations, this is the kind of short-term savings that may have long-term costs. The most recent (2012) MetLife survey found that overall job satisfaction of American teachers was at a twenty-five-year low and that the less-satisfied teachers were more likely to be located in schools with declining opportunities for collaboration.¹³ As we strengthen and remodel literacy education, time for teacher collaboration must be extended, not cut, if we are to build a foundation for high achievement.



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"Excluding administrative duties, how much time per week do teachers spend working in structured collaboration with other educators?"





THE POWER OF INVESTING IN COLLECTIVE CAPACITY

Recent research suggests that a school's social capital—the connections between educators and the extent to which they exchange and build on each other's knowledge—is just as powerful a predictor of student achievement as raw human capital—the skills of individual teachers.

In order to remodel schools to be more functional for today's needs, the major structural elements that need to be opened up are not walls but how we deploy the human capital within schools and especially their most precious resource, time. Most current reform efforts focus on training and incentivizing individual teachers. This approach, however, leaves the basic structure of isolated teachers and compartmentalized content in place, failing to maximize the shared value that is created when educators pool their individual expertise to create collective solutions.¹⁴ Scholars of the impact of teacher learning emphasize the notion of collaboration that builds collective capacity. Stoll et al. define capacity as “a complex blend of motivation, skill, positive learning, organizational conditions and culture, and infrastructure of support,” concluding from their extensive review of the literature that a focus on building collective capacity within schools is critical for sustainable improvement in student learning.¹⁵ Fullan explains that collective capacity works for two reasons: “One is that knowledge about effective practice becomes more widely available and accessible on a daily basis. The second reason is more powerful

still—working together generates commitment.”¹⁶ To get the greatest return on human capital investments, smart schools open up time so that teachers have access to each other and can work together on how best to put their training into practice. Recent research suggests that a school's social capital—the connections between educators and the extent to which they exchange and build on each other's knowledge—is just as powerful a predictor of student achievement as raw human capital—the skills of individual teachers.¹⁷ In other words, how much a student learns is a result of both the knowledge and training of the teacher but also how effectively that teacher works with and learns with other educators in the school. Moreover, investments in social capital or collective capacity are both more efficient and more sustainable: more efficient because people who learn together share the benefit of their collective trial and error; more sustainable because the capacity that is built is distributed, and therefore better able to withstand the departure of strong individual teachers. Remodeled schools deploy their people and time to maximize the development of collective capacity.



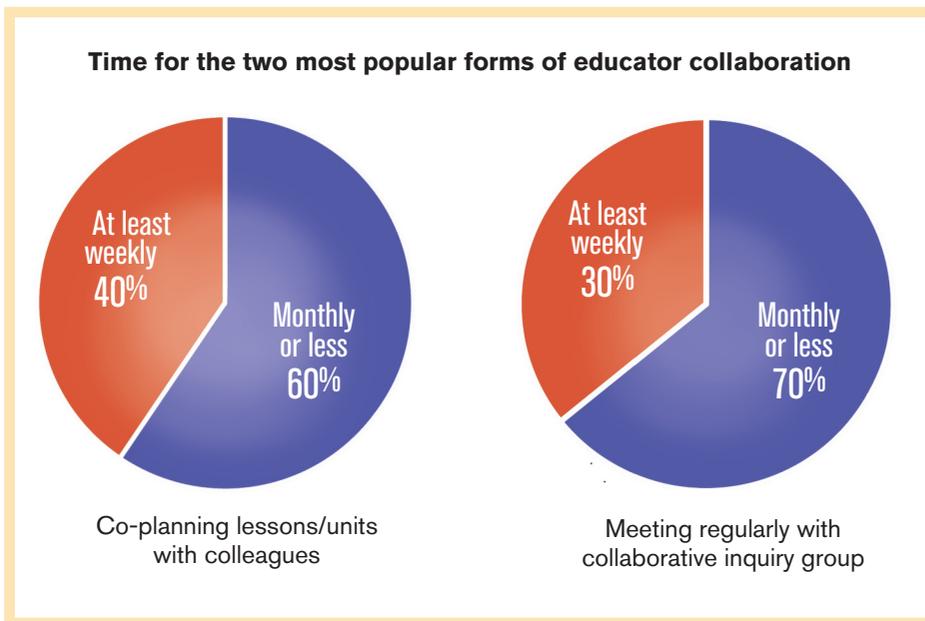
FINDING

4 Many of the building blocks for remodeling literacy learning are in place

This survey documents the many ways in which educators are already working together, pooling their resources and expertise to design learning experiences that will support advanced cross-disciplinary literacy among their students. Often they are doing so with limited time or formal support. As US schools start to remodel to meet higher literacy expectations, the building blocks identified below have the potential to strengthen the structure.

Structures for collaboration are emerging, but time devoted to them is limited

The NCLE survey found that two-thirds of US teachers report participating at least monthly in key forms of professional collaboration, including co-planning with colleagues and participating in collaborative inquiry, defined as “data team, Professional Learning Community, Community of Practice, professional reading or book study.” Recall that these are the two forms of professional learning cited by more educators than any others as making the greatest impact on their practice. While it is encouraging that these collaborative structures are at least present, when we dig deeper we see that the amount of time teachers have to spend working in collaboration remains very small.



If we look deeper into specific forms of collaboration, we find that classroom teachers reported in the survey that the most common kinds of teams they participate in are grade-level and subject-area teams.

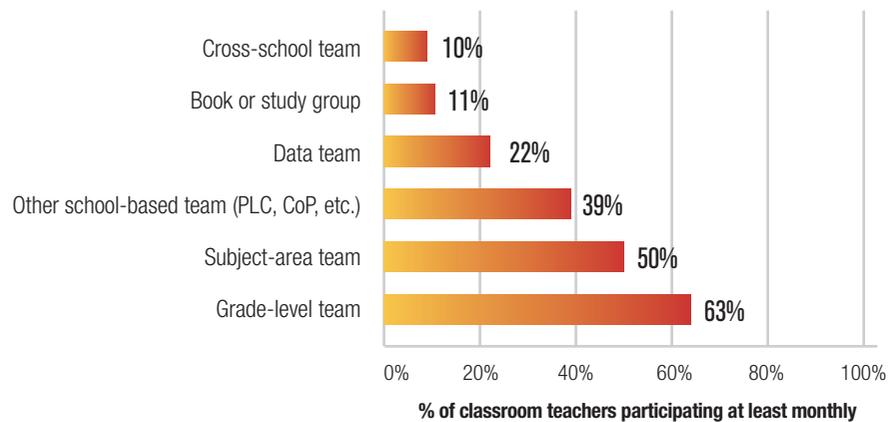


A large majority of educators engage in the most popular forms of professional collaboration only once a month or less.



One way that educators are breaking the isolation of their classrooms is by building new learning communities online, using technology to take ownership over their own professional learning in a climate where money and time for professional learning are tight.

In what kinds of teams do classroom teachers participate?



Grade-level teams are the dominant format for collaboration in elementary grades, with subject-area teams becoming the most common configuration for collaboration in middle and high schools.

Remember, however, that as of 2009 the average US teacher reported spending less than 3 hours per week collaborating with colleagues. So while collaboration is widespread in the sense that most educators have access to at least some structure for collaboration, the total amount of time devoted to it remains quite small. And one-third of respondents to our survey were participating in these critical forms of professional learning less than monthly, some not at all.

Educators are building professional networks online

One way that educators are breaking the isolation of their classrooms is by building new learning communities online, using technology to take ownership over their own professional learning in a climate where money and time for professional learning are tight. Forty-four percent of survey respondents said they go online to seek and share ideas with other educators at least monthly, with 23% doing so weekly or more. Beyond those kinds of informal, less structured exchanges, 23% of respondents said they participated at least monthly in a formal online educator community or network, and 64% of respondents said they had participated in at least one Web seminar or online workshop in the past twelve months. Compared to most other forms of professional learning studied, educators are more likely to participate in these forms of online learning voluntarily, presumably on their own time. Although stereotypes of the “wired generation” might suggest that it is predominantly younger teachers participating in this self-directed, online learning, our data show almost no difference in participation in any of these forms of online learning between educators with 5 or fewer years in the profession and educators with more than twenty.

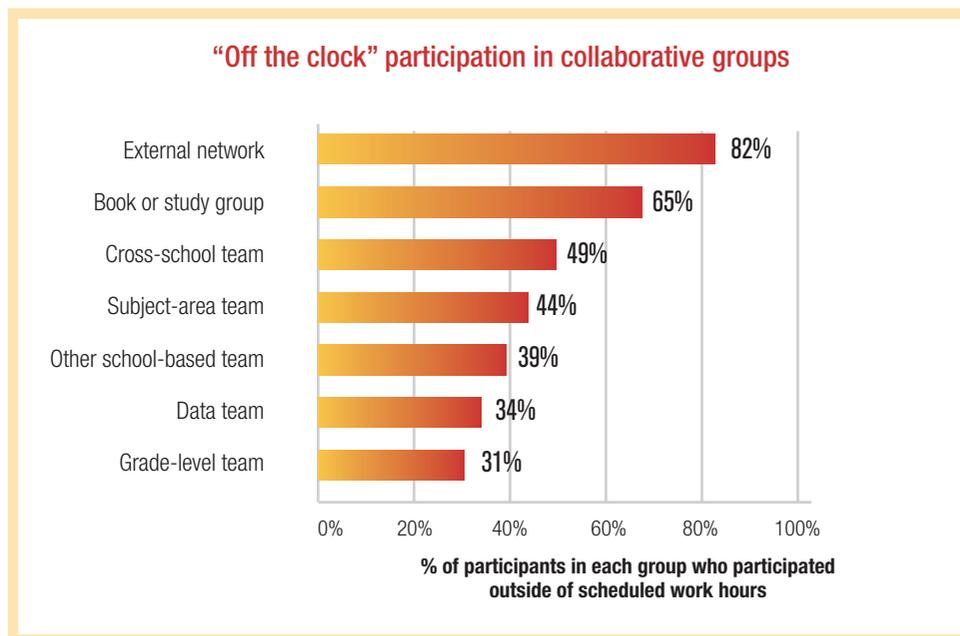
Many educators value professional collaboration enough to participate on their own time

We also asked those who participated in each type of team whether or not time for participation was built into their workday. Although the majority of those who participate in school-based teams organized by grade level or subject do so “on the clock,” there are still substantial numbers of educators participating in these and other forms of collaboration on their own time.

The amount of their own time that educators are investing in developing their skills and knowledge speaks well to their dedication and commitment and no doubt benefits the students in their classrooms. But these kinds of piecemeal, voluntary investments seem unlikely to bring about the kind of systematic shift called for by rising literacy expectations. A school or district that is thoughtfully remodeled to meet today’s learning needs will design experiences that will consistently allow all teachers to learn and work together more effectively in the service of all students.



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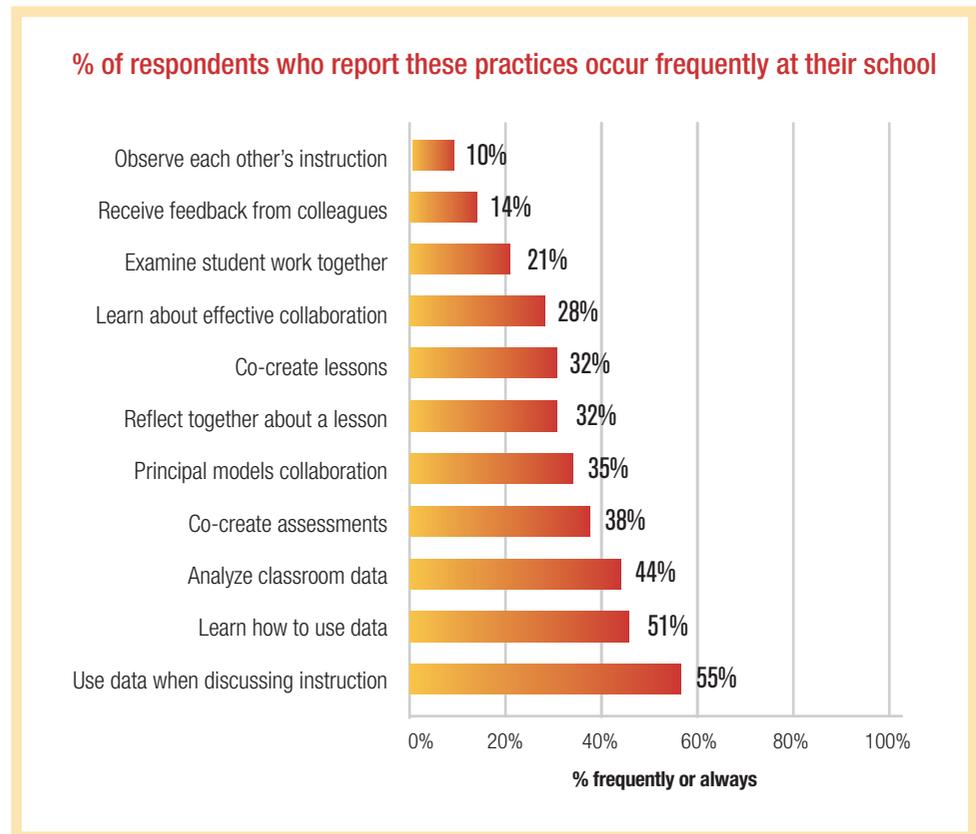


Use of student data to ground collaborative work is common

The subject of teachers and data has received extensive media attention lately, mostly focused on the education profession pushing back against the idea of using student test scores to evaluate the performance of individual teachers. A casual newspaper reader could easily develop the impression that teachers are uninterested in student performance data or outright hostile to it. Results from this survey suggest quite the opposite, with educators reporting that working with student data is one of the most frequent and one of the most useful things they do when they have the opportunity to work together.



More important for the quality and impact of collaboration, educators don't just do data work because they have to—they do it because they find it valuable in their professional practice.



Based on our review of the research literature, we compiled a list of eleven collaborative practices shown to have positive impact on student achievement.¹⁸ Teachers responding to the survey were asked how often each of those practices is used at their school; the three practices used most frequently all involved working with data:

- Teachers use student data when discussing curriculum and instruction;
- Teachers at our school learn how to use data to assess student learning needs; and
- Teachers analyze classroom data with each other to inform student learning.

More important for the quality and impact of collaboration, educators don't just do data work because they have to—they do it because they find it valuable in their professional practice. All respondents who indicated in the survey that they participate in any kind of collaborative group in their school were asked to rate the value of nine common collaborative activities. Data work was the second most highly valued of the nine, with 54.3% saying that analyzing student data was of "major value" to their group's professional learning, with another 33.1% finding it moderately valuable.

These responses suggest an increasingly data-literate education workforce, a vital resource that can be catalyzed the more opportunities that educators have to work together.

Librarians and literacy coaches play a critical role in building schools' collective capacity to improve literacy learning

In many schools, the work of classroom teachers is supported by literacy specialists, coaches, and librarians. Librarians in particular have been vocal about how their expertise in accessing, evaluating, and applying information can be put to use in helping students master the new Common Core State Standards.¹⁹

% of respondents by role group who participate in each type of team at least monthly

	Classroom teacher	Literacy specialist/coach	Librarian
Subject-area team	51%	52%	53%
Other school-based team (PLC, CoP, etc.)	38%	67%	43%

As the chart shows, librarians and literacy specialists/coaches are participating in some forms of school-based collaborative teams at rates equal to or greater than classroom teachers. As a capacity-building strategy, including the specialized expertise of literacy coaches and librarians in teachers' collaborative work maximizes the potential for shared professional learning that fosters student literacy learning.

Building blocks for change exist—but a new blueprint is needed

The building blocks summarized in this section—teaming structures, educators seeking collaborative learning on their own time and through online professional networks, use of data, and the expertise of literacy coaches and librarians—demonstrate that school leaders are starting to realize that some remodeling is needed to support the modern multi-faceted definition of literacy. Educators understand that working in isolation will not get the job done, and they are ready for change. These data reveal many signs that educators are already moving toward a more collaborative and networked approach to professional learning in the service of meeting student needs. The findings about the limited amount of time available for collaboration, however, indicate that these promising efforts are bumping up against traditional structures, schedules, and resource allocations in schools. All of these efforts will be limited in their effectiveness while the fundamental structure of schools keeps teachers largely isolated from their colleagues. Working around an outdated structure will never be as efficient or sustainable as remodeling to support the flow of how we work and learn now.



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FINDING

5 Effective collaboration needs systemic support



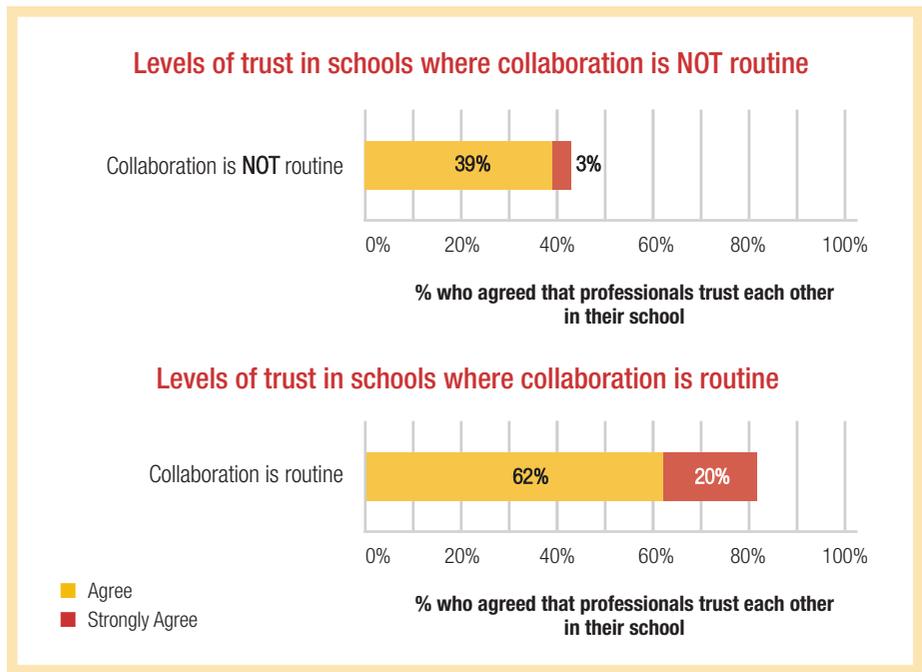
The data shows, the more educators agreed that collaboration is how they do business at their site, the more likely they were to agree that the school also had high levels of trust among teachers, administrators, and other staff, and that new learning about effective practice is shared.

Data from our survey show that schools where collaboration is the norm reap a host of benefits. Agreement with the statement “Collaboration is a routine part of how we do our jobs here” was significantly correlated with other valued professional learning outcomes including

- high levels of trust among educators;
- educators sharing new learning about best practices;
- educators being encouraged to try new ideas;
- use of student data when discussing curriculum and instruction.

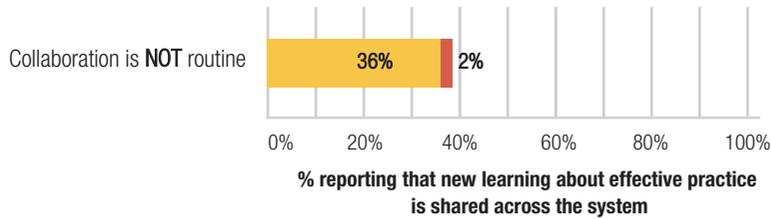
The data shows, the more educators agreed that collaboration is how they do business at their site, the more likely they were to agree that the school also had high levels of trust among teachers, administrators, and other staff, and that new learning about effective practice is shared. Both professional trust and channels for disseminating learning about best practices have been shown by large-scale longitudinal studies to be powerful contributors to school improvement.²⁰

The chart below shows reported levels of professional trust in two groups of schools: those where educators agreed that collaboration was routine, and those where a majority of educators did not agree that collaboration is routinely practiced.

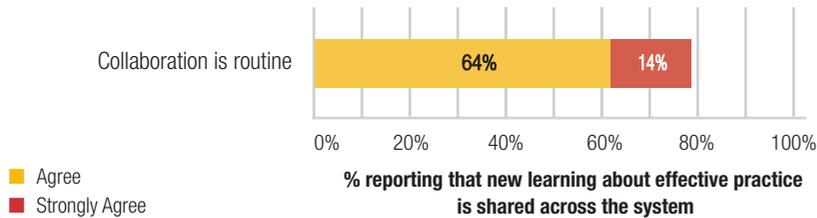


There was also a strong relationship between reported collaboration and agreement that “new learning about effective practices is shared across the system.”

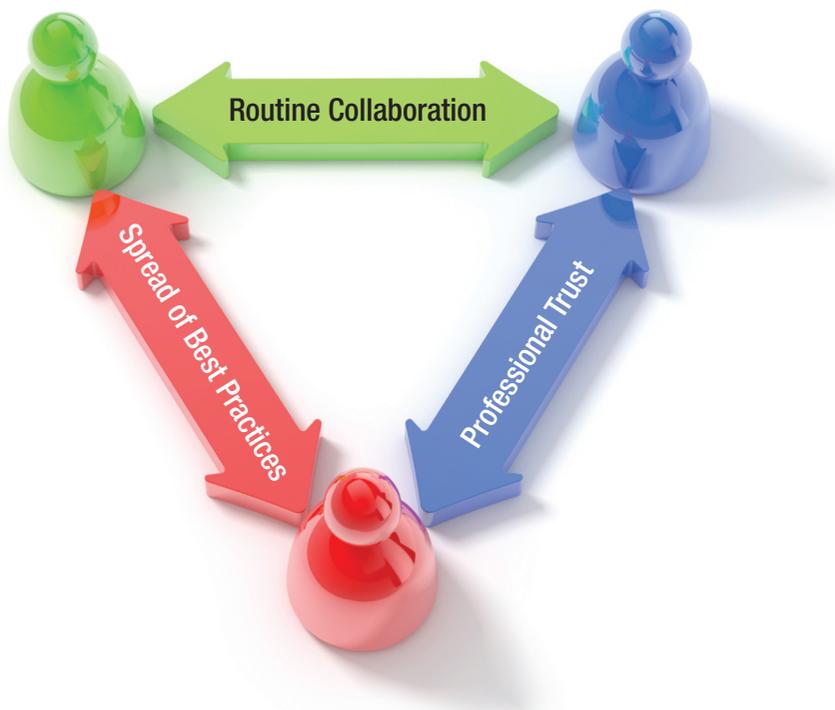
Spread of best practices in schools where collaboration is NOT routine



Spread of best practices in schools where collaboration is routine



These data suggest that trust, routine collaboration, and the spread of best practices exist in a reciprocal, mutually reinforcing relationship, where more of any one leads to more of the others, a classic “virtuous cycle.”



Both professional trust and channels for disseminating learning about best practices have been shown by large-scale longitudinal studies to be powerful contributors to school improvement.



Principals modeling collaboration was strongly correlated with high levels of trust in a school.

Principals play a vital role in supporting effective professional collaboration

Our data also highlight the crucial role that principals and other school leaders play in facilitating effective staff collaboration. Eighty-five percent of all non-administrator respondents agreed with the statement about their school, “Our leadership supports and promotes collaborative work,” with 27% agreeing strongly. We found that those who agreed strongly were significantly more likely to say that their administrators go beyond support to more active encouragement, including modeling collaboration, ensuring that faculty have training in the most effective ways to work together, and providing dedicated time in the school day for them to do so. In fact, the principal actively modeling collaboration—walking the walk—was one of the factors most strongly correlated with high levels of trust in the school and of collaboration being practiced routinely.

In the most recent MetLife national survey (2012), 80% of principals reported having “a great deal” of control over teacher schedules, making this one of the policy levers to support more productive professional learning over which school-level leaders have the most control.²¹

Training in collaboration pays off in the use of effective practices

Another important systemic support for collaboration is the provision of tools and training that help educators work together more effectively. Principals who modeled collaboration were also significantly more likely to provide such training to their staff. Providing training in effective collaboration was significantly correlated in our data to the reported use of effective team practices. Respondents who reported that “Our faculty learns about effective ways to work together” were much more likely to report the frequent use of the following powerful collaborative practices:

- Making commitments to try things in practice and report back on the results
- Sharing what is learned with others beyond the team
- Challenging each other and engaging in hard conversations
- Analyzing the impact of new practices on student learning

For principal modeling/trust, correlation is $r=.536$, $p < .01$; for principal modeling/routine collaboration, correlated at $r=.471$, $p < .01$.

Pearson's correlations $r > .42$, all significant at $p < .01$ (two tailed)



Implications for Remodeling Literacy Learning

Results from NCLE's "National Survey of Collaborative Professional Learning Opportunities" show how educators across all disciplines are seeing the need to collaborate to meet students' complex, cross-disciplinary literacy needs. Just as other workplaces are becoming more fluid, adaptive, and collaborative, schools must move away from compartmentalizing teachers and content if they are to tackle the shared task of literacy development. Compartmentalized schools don't take advantage of the benefits of the problem-solving and instructional improvements that take place when teachers have opportunities to think through challenges together.

As this report shows clearly, educators across subject areas and professional roles are stepping up to claim a vital role in developing more complex student literacy. This report also highlights, however, the ways in which this understanding of the challenge, acceptance of responsibility, and desire for change are bumping up against traditional schedules, structures, and resource allocations in schools. While educators in our study report that collaborating with colleagues is the most powerful form of professional learning (a finding with extensive support in other research), they also say they currently have very limited time to work together. By documenting how these forces are currently operating within US schools, we hope to offer practical solutions that will harness the skills, ingenuity, and dedication of educators to help students meet the elevated literacy expectations of tomorrow's workforce.

NCLE's role in remodeling

As this study and other recent research clearly demonstrate, teaching can no longer be a solitary pursuit. NCLE connects educators within a school or district and promotes knowledge exchanges in schools across the United States. Teams can digitally "follow" and share resources with others who face challenges similar to their own. Those who do so systematically can earn national recognition as Centers for Literacy Education.

NCLE brings together high-quality research and resources from thirty of the leading professional societies for educators in the United States. Teams can efficiently locate articles, video clips, webinars, and studies that support better instructional decision making through NCLE's Literacy in Learning Exchange site. And if they don't find what they seek, NCLE expedites the development of new resources to meet emerging needs and can provide customized professional learning experiences.

All of the materials gathered by NCLE are free, so even educators and teams who choose not to register in the Literacy in Learning Exchange can access resources and share information. By bringing hard-working educators together, NCLE serves as a "network of networks" for all who want to enrich literacy learning. As shifts in instructional practices are phased in with the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, NCLE stakeholders serve as a rapid response team to share information about the school conditions, plans, and assessments that enrich student learning.

There is much to learn about how to collaborate effectively. One of the central reasons why NCLE came together as a coalition was to provide educators with support and tools to make the best use of the limited time they have to work together. The tools on our website and the questions in this survey about effective collaboration are drawn from our research-based “Framework for Capacity Building” (see Appendix A). Its six domains, outlined below, summarize the extensive literature on the characteristics of collaboration that make a difference for student learning.

FRAMEWORK FOR CAPACITY BUILDING



The four domains in the center describe behaviors that collaborative teams engage in that have been demonstrated to have an impact on their classroom practice and student learning. Those team activities are supported by shared agreements about effective literacy practices and by explicit system support for collaboration. This support should take the form not just of encouragement and affirmation but of concrete resources such as dedicated time for teachers to work together and training in how to do it effectively.



While educators in our study report that collaborating with colleagues is the most powerful form of professional learning (a finding with extensive support in other research), they also say they currently have very limited time to work together.

Policy recommendations

Educators, school leaders, and policymakers must all act to increase student literacy. Key findings in this report provide bases for these actions:

- Because literacy is the foundation for learning in every subject, all educators must foster student literacy.
- When those educators work together—planning, analyzing student work, coordinating curricula, and assessing formatively—they contribute to increasing student literacy.
- Although some individual building blocks for remodeling literacy education are in place, multiple stakeholders must collaborate to organize systems to support progress in student literacy learning.

Actions based on five critical goals can advance the literacy learning that is essential for student success now and into the future.

Goal 1

Educators must know elements of literacy pertinent to their content areas.

Actions:

Educators must know within their content areas the literacy elements of how questions are asked, research done, findings shared, and learning assessed. These content areas include science, history, physical education, mathematics, music, English language arts, and all other subjects taught in schools. Educators must understand the reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills needed by students in their content areas. Educators must also know the pedagogical strategies that help students become better readers, writers, speakers, and listeners in their own content areas.

Principals as instructional leaders must know that educators in different content areas may use different approaches to teaching reading and writing based on their disciplines. Principals who support ongoing, job-embedded professional learning enable teachers, librarians, literacy coaches, and other educators to learn from one another, comparing and contrasting knowledge and practices so that students learn how to read and write increasingly complex texts as they encounter new concepts and enter into new disciplines during their schooling.

Policymakers can support learning about literacy within educators' subject areas through preservice and ongoing professional learning. Legislators and accreditors can recognize that in preservice preparation all educators, whatever their path to certification, must know the literacy needs of students in their content areas, and that principals, whatever their road to their leadership positions, must know ways to support educators in all content areas in promoting literacy learning for all students in their schools. Policymakers must support conditions that enable educators and principals to stay current in the literacy learning developments generated by such influences as technology, brain research, and emergent areas of integrated study and practice.

Goal 2

Collaboration of educators is essential for deep student learning.

Actions:

Educators must openly share their professional knowledge, practice, and decision making so that they can coordinate student literacy learning in every content area. This collaboration includes, among other topics, (1) curriculum development, (2) analysis of student work across content areas and grades, (3) assessments that focus on developmental aspects of writing and reading, and (4) pedagogical strategies to address the needs of different learners. As this report states, “A school’s social capital is as powerful a predictor of student achievement as raw human capital.”

Principals set conditions for educator collaboration. Three examples are illustrative: (1) The structure of the school day allows or prohibits educator interaction; (2) Evaluation that focuses on only individual educator accomplishment subtracts from commitment to and pride in collaborative success in student achievement; and (3) Sharing with parents the positive outcomes of collaborative efforts for educators and students garners community understanding, participation, and affirmation.

Policymakers can through legislation, guidelines, and rulemaking affirm the conditions necessary for educator collaboration. For example, rather than focusing on individual teacher evaluation tied to short-term changes based on test scores, policies can focus on school factors that improve student learning over time. Funded research can reveal connections between educator collaborative practices and student literacy learning.

Goal 3

Professional learning must be ongoing, job-embedded, collaborative, and linked to engaging and challenging literacy learners across grades and subjects.

Actions:

Educators who align curricula and pedagogical strategies across grades and content areas offer students a developmentally sound, well-aligned literacy education. Eager to keep learning, educator teams model for students the kind of continuous learning necessary to be literate. Educators who continue to learn about the similarities and differences in literacy across content areas can create coherence in schooling.

Principals as co-learners with educators can grow in knowledge of the kinds of professional learning that contribute to continuous learning by teachers and school leaders. School leaders and educators can jointly analyze problems, build better practices, assess results, and continue together to improve conditions for literacy learning. Shared agreements about practices and conditions contribute to the stamina and persistence needed for change.

Policymakers should invest in professional learning that builds on what educators learn on a daily basis from observing, analyzing, and formatively assessing student learning. Investment in self-led, collaborative professional learning, aimed at increased student learning, teacher retention and engagement, and school-wide improvement, portends well for successful schools.



Rather than focusing on individual teacher evaluation tied to short-term changes based on test scores, policies can focus on school factors that improve student learning over time. Funded research can reveal connections between educator collaborative practices and student literacy learning.



Principals must courageously and judiciously rearrange school schedules to add collaborative time in teachers' workdays so that they can support and hold each other accountable for reaching goals for themselves and for their students.

Goal 4

Schools must deploy educator time to maximize the development of collective capacity.

Actions:

Educators need time during the school day to collaborate as they build their capacity to contribute to literacy learning of all students. Relieved of hall duty, restroom surveillance, mountains of paperwork, and excessive testing for accountability, teachers can collaborate in planning and aligning literacy lessons, analyzing data and student work, and learning about such topics as the needs of diverse students and the effects of technology on ways we think, write, and read. The point of collaborative time is not for individual teacher activity but for increasing teachers' expertise across a department, school, or district for a greater collective impact on student literacy learning.

Principals must courageously and judiciously rearrange school schedules to add collaborative time in teachers' workdays so that they can support and hold each other accountable for reaching goals for themselves and for their students. This report reveals that teachers are ready for collaborative efforts but have precious few moments even to begin such work. Principals and district superintendents must envision and enact new schedules, new uses of physical facilities, and new uses of technologies for student instruction and for teacher professional learning.

Policymakers need to acknowledge in their development of policies, rules, and regulations that building collective capacity is essential. Such educator capacity emerges during time devoted to mutual understanding, learning, application of learning, and assessment of that application. Capacity for change must be figured into expectations for evidence of positive effects of new practices and policies.

Goal 5

Building a system based on shared agreements about literacy leads to deeper learning in every subject.

Actions:

Educators who do the hard work of forging agreements about literacy learning across grades and content areas constitute one part of the systematic approach to literacy that is essential for students. Based on educator-led formative assessment, educators continually modify and improve instruction appropriate for diverse students with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, abilities and disabilities, and literacy aims in their educational paths to college and career. Educators provide a coordinated approach that offers seamless movement in literacy instruction through preschool, elementary school, middle school, and high school.

Principals play a key role in building a successful system because they set conditions and provide supports that foster alignment across grades and content areas. They can bolster teachers, families, and students at the same time that they collaborate with district administrators in district-wide decision making. Principals and other school leaders can rearrange building blocks that already exist and create necessary new blocks to construct a system for supporting literacy learning.

Policymakers can promote structures that support coordinated educator decision-making practices at the school, district, and state levels. Policymakers can look carefully at the effects of multiple factors across systems. Achievement by one school in a district or a few districts in a state is insufficient and inequitable. Systems must welcome students from vastly different socioeconomic situations and with a wide range of background knowledge by supplying a network of collaborative supporters who maximize the literacy learning potential of them all. The system must be built to support all educators and learners.



Achievement by one school in a district or a few districts in a state is insufficient and inequitable. ... The system must be built to support all educators and learners.



This report notes, “The most effective school systems in the world design their schools so that teachers spend substantial portions of their day working alongside other educators to think through challenges together.” This kind of collaborative practice can effectively extend to all those who care about meeting challenges of student learning in our educational system. Teachers, librarians, literacy coaches, principals, school leaders, families, community members, and policymakers all can contribute to addressing the challenges in literacy education today by studying the findings and by implementing the actions described in this report.

In fact, in most other developed nations, the job of “teacher” is defined quite differently: classroom instruction takes up less than half of a teacher’s work day. The rest of the day is spent on activities designed to make that classroom instruction more powerful, such as preparing lessons, planning with colleagues, observing peers, and analyzing student work.

REMODELED SCHOOLS MAKE BETTER USE OF EDUCATOR EXPERTISE

The most effective school systems in the world design their schools so that teachers spend substantial portions of their day working alongside other educators to think through challenges together. In fact, in most other developed nations, the job of “teacher” is defined quite differently: classroom instruction takes up less than half of a teacher’s work day. The rest of the day is spent on activities designed to make that classroom instruction more powerful, such as preparing lessons, planning with colleagues, observing peers, and analyzing student work.²² US teachers, by contrast, spend an estimated 80% of their time engaged in classroom instruction, with the 3–5 hours weekly they do have for planning generally scheduled so they are working alone, not in collaboration with colleagues.²³ Over the course of the school year, this adds up to US teachers having hundreds of hours less than teachers in other developed nations to plan and learn together to hone their instruction.²⁴

In the United States, district and school leaders are beginning to rethink how they invest in teacher development, recognizing that a shift from sending individual teachers to offsite workshops to investing in team-focused, school-based support may pay more dividends.²⁵ Principals are re-thinking master schedules to free up more time for teachers to work together, teachers are making sure that meeting time is used for learning, not administrative

business, and smart use of technology allows shared learning to take place more flexibly across time and distance.²⁶

Many of NCLE’s stakeholders partner with schools seeking to remodel how they use time and human capital to better support student learning. For example,

- Learning Forward’s Learning School Alliance program helps schools use time and technology wisely to support learning communities that are committed to “collective responsibility, goal alignment, and ongoing job-embedded professional learning.”²⁷
- The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF) STEM learning teams bring together “the core competencies of trust, collaboration, and shared accountability for student achievement” among cross-curricular teams developing and testing project-based learning units.²⁸
- The Ball Foundation’s decade-long program of partnerships with mid-size urban school districts concluded that de-isolating educator practice and making “time for dedicated collaboration . . . the norm rather than the exception in the design of school calendars and school days” was critical to the transformation of adult and student learning.²⁹



Appendixes

Appendix A: NCLE Framework for Capacity Building

Conditions and Practices That Support Effective Collaboration and Impact Student Learning

This framework provides an overview of the types of organizational conditions and practices that have the greatest impact on student learning. Meaningful and sustainable improvements in student learning happen through capacity building. The process of building capacity is a developmental one. It is unlikely that all of these conditions and practices are present throughout the system consistently. Centers for Literacy Education (<http://bit.ly/nclecenters>) realize that this process is developmental and choose one or two domains to focus on improving each academic year.

In addition to establishing content-related goals for your group's professional learning, research indicates that goals associated with the process of learning should also be established. This Capacity-Building Framework and related NCLE self-assessment tools provide research-based guidance for setting goals to improve the process of professional learning. These tools were developed based on the findings from the NCLE literature review, *Building Capacity to Transform Literacy Learning* (Nelson, 2012, <http://bit.ly/ncleshortreview>).

Domain 1: Deprivatizing Practice

- Formal and informal peer observation occur regularly.
- All share in the accountability for student learning.
- Adult learning is a shared responsibility.
- Evidence is collected and comfortably discussed with others.
- Learning that occurs through collaboration is captured and shared with others.

Domain 2: Enacting Shared Agreements

- Decision making and actions focus on improving student learning.
- All hold agreements about what quality literacy instruction looks like and about essential outcomes.
- All agree on how to effectively assess essential outcomes.
- Daily work and decision making are driven by these shared agreements.
- Literacy emphasis occurs across content areas.

Domain 3: Creating Collaborative Culture

- Successes and failures are shared safely and without judgment.
- Time for collaboration is used productively and with purpose.
- Participants share the leadership and own the process and outcomes.
- Group members engage in hard conversations.

Domain 4: Maintaining an Inquiry Stance

- Collaborative work has clear goals and purpose.
- Collaboration focuses on the core issues of student learning in our context.
- Intended student outcomes are clearly defined, and progress is closely monitored.
- A cycle of plan/act/reflect is used to solve problems of practice.
- Commitments are made to act and report back to the group.
- Appropriate expertise is sought when needed.

Domain 5: Using Evidence Effectively

- Collaboration is grounded in evidence of student learning.
- Multiple sources of data are available.
- Participants know how to use data effectively.
- Student work is examined and discussed regularly with others.
- Actions are assessed in terms of impact on student learning.

Domain 6: Supporting Collaboration Systemically

- Dedicated time is provided for professional collaboration within the work week.
- Training, assistance, and tools are provided for effective collaboration.
- Leadership supports and promotes collaborative work.
- Leaders ensure access to timely data sources.
- Experimenting with practice and trying new ideas are encouraged.

Use NCLE's Asset Inventory (<http://bit.ly/ncleassetinv>) to determine where your group's strengths and weaknesses fall within these domains.

The inventory is intended to reveal your collaborative group's perceptions of how often and to what degree these capacity-building conditions and practices show up in your day-to-day activities. These are the assets upon which you can build ongoing efforts leading to successful learning for every student.

This framework was developed by Catherine A. Nelson, Robert Hill, Michael Palmisano, Lara Hebert, and Sharon Roth on behalf of the National Center for Literacy Education (NCLE). NCLE brings together leading education associations, policy organizations, and foundations to support powerful learning about literacy in every discipline and sustained school improvement.

Appendix B: NCLE's Stakeholders

Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE)
American Association of School Librarians (AASL)
American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)
ASCD
Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE)
Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE)
Connecticut Center for School Change
Consortium for School Networking (CoSN)
Cotsen Foundation for the ART of TEACHING
Ford's Theatre
Helmsley Trust
Human Systems Dynamics Institute (HSD)
International Reading Association (IRA)
International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE)
Learning Forward
National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)
National Association of Secondary School Principals (NAASP)
National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS)
National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL)
National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF)
National Conference on Research in Language and Literacy (NCRL)
National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS)
National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)
National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM)
National Science Teachers Association (NSTA)
National Writing Project (NWP)
Panasonic Foundation
TESOL International Association
The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform
Verizon Foundation

Appendix C: Respondent Demographics

Role		Years of experience	
Classroom teacher	74%	5 years or fewer	13%
Classroom support (special education, ELL, intervention push-in, paraprofessional)	16%	6 to 10 years	19%
Coach / mentor / literacy specialist	3%	11 to 20 years	36%
Librarian / media specialist	3%	21 or more years	32%
Building-level technology specialist	.5%	School level	
Building administrator	3%	Elementary	43%
		Middle	24%
		High	33%
Primary teaching assignment (teachers only)		% of students from low-income families	
Self-contained classroom teaching multiple subjects	32%	Less than 25%	23%
Special education	18%	25% – 49%	23%
Arts	4%	50% – 74%	21%
English language arts	14%	75% or more	24%
Foreign languages	4%	Not sure	9%
Natural sciences	7%	% of students from minority families	
Social sciences	6%	Less than 25%	40%
Math	9%	25% – 49%	19%
Vocational or Career	3%	50% – 74%	14%
Technology/Computer science	2%	75% or more	20%
English as a Second Language	1%	Not sure	7%
School location		% of students who speak English as a second language	
Inner city	11%	Less than 25%	63%
Urban	17%	25% – 49%	14%
Suburban	37%	50% – 74%	6%
Small town/rural	35%	75% or more	8%
School size (# of students served)		% of students with IEPs	
Fewer than 500	34%	Less than 25%	60%
500 – 1,000	43%	25% – 49%	23%
More than 1,000	24%	50% – 74%	3%
School type		75% or more	.5%
Public	89%	Not sure	13%
Charter	1%		
Private, religious	6%		
Private, independent	3%		

Figures are rounded to the nearest whole number.

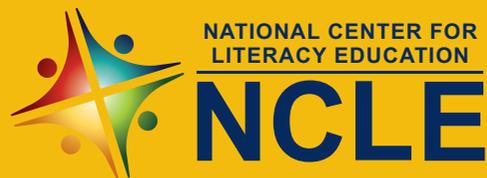


Endnotes

Endnotes

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