

The Need for Teacher Communities: An Interview with Linda Darling-Hammond

*Linda Darling-Hammond will speak at the
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**Teaching is
definitely
a team sport.**

—Linda Darling-Hammond

When teachers can collaborate with other teachers, they can better serve their students, and are more likely to stay in the profession. Yet, in the US—unlike in many other countries—most teachers aren't given enough time in their workdays to form communities.

So says Linda Darling-Hammond, professor of education at Stanford University, author of more than 300 publications, and one-time candidate for US Secretary of Education. She also is a former president of the American Educational Research Association and former executive director of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.

"For most American teachers, there's not that much opportunity for real collaboration," says Darling-Hammond, pointing to federal surveys showing that only 15 percent of American teachers in 2009 felt they were in settings that were highly collaborative.

Yet, professional communities of teachers can have a large and positive impact, doing much more than simply sharing teaching tips. Teachers who are able to collaborate with other teachers "are really engaged in it—in work where they are rolling up their sleeves to design and evaluate curriculum and instruction together in a way that allows them to share their expertise deeply and in a sustained and ongoing fashion."

Schools with such teacher communities are "places which have an open-door policy where there are people in and out of each other's classrooms. There's lots of sharing of information and exemplars where teachers have the opportunity to see each other engage in practice," says Darling-Hammond.

"They are places with thoughtful instructional leaders who both understand and value good instruction and know how to support professional learning and professional collaboration in the schools."

In order for such teaching communities to exist, schools need to allocate time to teachers during the work week to collaborate, whether in grade-level or department-level teams or a combination of both. Yet, the US is relatively poor at providing such time, compared with other countries, says Darling-Hammond.

"In the US, typically teachers will have three to five hours per week scheduled for individual planning," she says. "In most high-performing European and Asian schools, teachers have 15 to 20 hours a week for a combination of individual collaborative planning—engaging in lesson study, action research, peer study, and collaboration—as well as meeting with parents and students one on one."

In European and Asian schools, “there’s an expectation of collaboration and the development of shared curriculum and practice,” she says.

So how are other countries able to give their teachers so much more time for planning and collaboration?

Darling-Hammond explains that it boils down to having more teachers and using time in smarter ways.

“They hire more teachers and they spread the teaching work across more teachers,” she says. “In the US, only about 53 percent of education employees are actually teachers, and only 43 percent of these are full-time practicing classroom teachers. In many other countries, 70 to 80 percent of the educational workforce is practicing classroom teachers.”

In contrast, the US has more administrative staff. “Not necessarily principals, but more levels of governance with staffing—more paraprofessionals and adjunct members of the workforce than is seen in other countries.”

In addition, schools in other countries organize time differently. “There’s sort of an urban legend in the US that we have a shorter school year than other countries,” she says. “But in terms of actual hours that kids are in instruction, we are nearly the highest in the world.”

US students receive the same amount of instructional hours, but in a shorter timeframe. “We cram it into about 180 days, while in other countries, the school year is 200 to 220 days.”

The school days themselves in other countries are less content-packed and agenda-driven, according to Darling-Hammond.

“The amount of instruction time is smaller for both the student and teacher. There is more open space for teacher time over that period. Kids may be engaged [in other things]. In some countries, the school day is shorter—four to five hours per day.” In others, the school day is longer—“but there is more recreation time, more clubs and other things going on in the school day.”

As for class size, some countries have larger class sizes than the US, while others have similar numbers of students.

“In Finland and the other Scandinavian countries, there is more teacher time and smaller classes,” she explains. “But in Asian countries, the class size is roughly around 30. It used to be 40 or more, but there is aggressive class-size reduction going on in Korea and other countries, such as Japan.”

Funding is apparently not the determining factor in whether teachers are given time to make communities. The US has “one of the highest spending rates—it’s *how* we spend it,” says Darling-Hammond.

In high-achieving countries, she notes, “kids are very well-supported by society [in terms of] housing, health care, food security. These countries have nationalized health care. They have housing support policies so families aren’t homeless.

“We do a lot of spending in US public schools to offset the fact that we have a tattered safety net for kids. We have the highest poverty rate for children [in the industrialized world]. Schools are spending money for food, health care, social welfare supports. Social workers and others are trying to figure out what to do with homeless kids.

“All the dysfunctions of our abandonment of children over the last 30 years is part of the school budget.”

Darling-Hammond points out that in the US, schools pay healthcare benefits for teachers (one-third of salary costs go to healthcare), which school systems in other countries don’t need to do, given the national systems they have. “Their schools aren’t paying for healthcare for teachers or kids.”

Instead, more money in these countries is available to go into direct educational programs than in the US.

Schools that are able to provide time for teachers so that they can collaborate with peers and develop communities can look forward to a variety of benefits, says Darling-Hammond.

“Everyone gets to share their knowledge and expertise. Nobody knows it all when it comes to teaching; teaching is infinitely complex and ever-changing. Kids provide all kinds of challenges and interesting differences, while the curriculum is always evolving. . . .”

“The opportunity to share what they know with each other also allows them to be individually successful and successful as a team—and teaching is definitely a team sport.”

In successful, high-achieving schools with strong teacher communities, “what goes on in the classroom is mutually enforcing—there’s a consensus about where we’re going and how to get there.”

Benefits include learning teaching skills and strategies from other teachers.

“You always have a way to have partners help you solve your problem, to help you improve your practice,” she says.

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“This allows you to be more effective with students. If you’re more efficacious, you’re more satisfied with your career.”

And if you are happier, you are less likely to leave the profession—meaning teacher communities can help prevent turnover.

“One of the biggest reasons for teachers [to quit teaching] is when they feel they are not being effective,” says Darling-Hammond. “The more efficacious they feel, the more satisfied they are, and the more they are likely to stay. The longer they stay, the more effective they become. It’s a virtuous circle.”

In other countries where teacher collaboration is more common, there is “very little teacher attrition.”

Darling-Hammond points out that some schools in the US are making teacher communities possible. “There are certainly some innovative schools that have redesigned their time. . . . When I was in New York City, there were dozens of new, small schools that were being recreated often by teachers . . . who had rethought the ‘factory model.’”

If schools are able to make time for teacher collaboration, sometimes it can take awhile for teachers to determine how to use the time effectively, she says.

“When people haven’t had the opportunity to collaborate before, they often don’t know how,” says Darling-Hammond. Teachers need to think about the best ways to use such time: “What are the current tasks, the assessment tasks, the examination of student work, the joint construction of lessons? What kind of action research is planned in that collegial time?”

At elementary schools, teams are typically grade-level teams. Sometimes primary and upper-grade level teams work together. At middle and high schools, people are more likely to organize around their content areas and disciplines.

“In some redesigned middle schools, they meet cross-content to plan around the students they may share,” she says.

The new Common Core State Standards may help foster teacher collaboration, says Darling-Hammond.

“If we’re successful in implementing the Common Core standards in a productive way, there will be curriculum support for teachers to draw upon. This should give teachers a common platform . . . and a better sense of learning progressions that students are expected to learn. If I have a student who is ‘here,’ then I can work with other teachers to figure out how to move him to ‘there.’”

Common Core standards may give teacher communities “something to plan around in a much more thoughtful way than many kinds of curricula in the past, which have been dominated by textbooks rather than a conception of learning and how it progresses.”

Darling-Hammond believes teacher collaboration is especially important in schools serving at-risk populations. In such schools, if teachers aren’t working as a team, students are likely to “fall through the cracks, because teachers are not communicating enough about students and what’s happening in their lives and what works and what’s going on with their family and so on.”

This is especially true at middle and high school levels, she says, when parents or other family members have not one classroom teacher to contact, but possibly six to eight.

“If the child is struggling with housing, if a parent has lost a job, if a parent has health issues—whatever it may be—unless adults are working closely together on behalf of the child and understand what’s going on, it’s very likely kids will fall through the cracks.”

Teachers working together are better able to share information about students with each other and to communicate with family members, says Darling-Hammond, again highlighting her view that the rewards of teacher community go beyond individual teachers to benefit students, families, and society as a whole.

Lorna Collier is a freelance writer and author based in northern Illinois. She can be reached at lorna@lornacollier.com.