

Strengthening Collaborative Teams

By: Ben Tonagel, LaPorte High School

Team Members Names: Johnna Krause, Carolyn McGuire

Contact: htonagel@lpcsc.k12.in.us

Background That Led to Your Team's Inquiry:

Our school went through an AdvancEd accreditation external team review in 2016 and was given two improvement priorities. To address the improvement priorities and to continue developing the school improvement plan our IPLI team wanted to do action research on strengthening collaborative teams. Therefore, the purpose of our action research was to improve a collaborative culture at LPHS.

Statement of Your Team's Wondering:

In what ways can the use of ground rules/norms build and/or enhance a collaborative culture in our school?

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into our wondering, we surveyed all teams/departments at LPHS to see how their teams function. Although all teams meet, we are working to improve our school's effectiveness through true collaboration. All dept. and teams were surveyed and we found that none had any agreed upon norms or operating rules for guiding collaboration time. Four of the teams replied to the inquiry that there was a need for norms and follow-up conversations in leadership team meetings revealed more of a need. Next, we conducted a norm activity during a monthly staff meeting for all teams to think about norm examples and non-examples. Teams then did break-out sessions to develop their collaborative team norms. Next, our IPLI team did the National School Reform Faculty "Compass Activity" to help team leaders understand the different perspectives in our school's teams and recognize how they affect collaboration. Team leaders then led their teams through the same activity. Then, teams applied outcomes from the first two activities to start discussion and development of models of instruction for their teams. The instructional models addressed what should be seen daily, weekly, and never seen in instruction. Finally, our IPLI team collected data to determine the impact the activities/interventions had on team collaboration. This was done through a survey and team collaboration rating scale.

Stating Your Team's Learning and Supporting it with Data:

"As a result of analyzing our data, (two/three) important things we learned include:

1) Team leaders and teachers recognize a need for stronger collaboration. Overall feedback from the initial survey to determine how teams function was positive although some comments were negative and fearful. Out of all the department teams surveyed none had any agreed upon norms or operating rules for guiding collaboration time. Four of the teams provided information that there was a need for norms and follow-up conversations in leadership team meetings revealed more of a need. Team feedback expressed that educators did not want one more thing to do, especially a top down directive. Teams need to feel empowered to develop their norms so there is ownership, participation, and input.

2) Collaborative teams at LPHS were strengthened through the action research activities. In a survey at the end of the action research 83% of respondents agreed to the following statement: "Setting norms as a PLC is

foundational for future collaboration.” Respondents were asked to reference one norm from their team and explain why that norm has been beneficial to collaboration. Some examples include:

- “There is an agenda to keep focus and prepare notes or questions that is sent prior to the meeting.”
- “Giving everybody the chance to talk allows all PLC members to have a stake in whatever we are doing.”
- “We agreed to let people talk without interruption. This helped with staying track.”
- “When all people attend our discussions are getting viewpoints of all group members.”

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

Our IPLI action research team learned that teachers want more collaboration and less informal meeting time. This means moving away from traditional department meetings to a collaborative culture where teams are discussing what students have learned, analyzing the data to support it, identifying interventions to improve learning, and making plans to support students who demonstrate learning. One of the barriers to stronger collaboration is time. In the broad picture of our large high school few of our collaborative teams have common collaboration time. Those that do have healthy, growing collaborative teams. Those who do not have common collaboration time find it more difficult to follow the process. Having a school-wide collaboration time would further add momentum to the collaboration push our IPLI team started. Having an established time carved out in the school day’s schedule is preferable and wanted.

Our IPLI action research team learned that team leadership is key to strong collaboration. Team leaders need ongoing training and professional development to continue growing. Teams with effective leadership tended to have more success implementing norms and completing the collaborative activities. Teams with less effective leaders struggled to complete the activities or did not place an emphasis of importance on them..

Our IPLI action research team learned that a school-wide data reporting template would benefit each team’s ability to document data and track student interventions in the collaboration process. While teams are collaborating more there is a need to standardize a process of school-wide data analysis and data use.

References:

N/A