

# **Staff Collaboration for Student Success: Implementation Challenges of Professional Learning Communities and Response to Intervention**

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## **Abstract**

*A staff's ability to positively influence student learning potential depends on the attitudes of individual staff members toward change, a positive school culture, access to appropriate professional development, and most importantly, administration that is able to provide time in flexible and creative ways. Professional Learning Communities (PLC) and Response to Intervention (RTI) can provide strong learner supports, if used effectively within a school.*

An educator's main goal is to ensure that all students learn required curriculum outcomes. However, no educator can provide all necessary supports for all learners. Using Professional Learning Communities (PLC) and Response to Intervention (RTI), staff work collaboratively to provide core instruction, scaffold at-risk learners, and build a community culture of learning. Collaboration requires a positive culture, collective purpose, open-minded staff, time, and appropriate professional development (PD) with administrative supports. Only through collaboration can staff guide all learners on their journey to reach their educational potential.

## **Professional Learning Communities**

PLCs are groups of educators working together with a collective purpose of high student achievement. PLCs are one response to the increasing demands to meet student needs despite strained resources and dissatisfaction with traditional methods of teaching and assessing. Educators have been forced to find more efficient methods to identify and respond to learner needs collectively (McIntosh et al., 2011). In response to systemic changes, educators have created PLCs to develop a shared vision for each school community, to act as a rudder to steer staff through unfamiliar and rough waters (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2007).

Teachers can not reach each student alone. Only a team effort will be successful (Vatakis, 2016). Each PLC must establish its guiding principles and core outcomes for instruction, with the addition of RTI to ensure that all students in their care meet the educational expectations of the school. With a collective purpose, or a sense of ownership, within a school students will reach their potential by using RTI strategies (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2012).

## **Response to Intervention**

RTI is not a set system or special education program for schools to follow, but research-based interventions within tiers of instruction. It is a continuum of supports that begins with core instruction for all learners. Students who experience challenges with core instruction are offered secondary supplemental evidence-based interventions. Struggling individuals requiring additional, more intensive, interventions are often identified as having a learning disability, but all students benefit from RTI strategies (Martinez & Young, 2011; Vatakis, 2016; Williams & Hierck, 2015).

RTI originally focused on reading intervention with students identified for special education, but has evolved into a belief that all students, with interventions, will achieve outcomes in all subject areas. RTI begins with staff identification of clear core instructional goals. For example, staff will identify essential outcomes, which they believe all students must achieve to meet grade level expectations or to earn a specific credit. A PLC group may function initially to carefully

deliberate essential outcome identification. This may be initially time consuming, but will focus later efforts. Periodic assessment of skills, followed by a focused response of re-teaching or scaffolding, minimizes the possibility that a student would be left behind or have gaps in knowledge (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010; Stuart, Rinaldi, & Higgins-Averill, 2011). Students who are struggling to learn the essential outcomes would receive one-on-one or small-group instruction focused on specific outcomes. Each school must shape the RTI system by using strategies that best suit their school culture and goals, using the tiers of instruction as a template not simply in the area of reading instruction.

### **Building a Positive School Culture**

A common defining element of PLC and RTI implementation at a school is its culture. The culture of a school is created by the history, values, beliefs, symbols, and stories within the building (Muhammad, 2009). This evolving culture can be positive or toxic. A positive culture has ideals of caring and a sense of shared responsibility among staff. All staff must share a belief that every child can and will learn. For this learning to happen, all staff must organize in a shared quest while considering the viewpoints of all. Staff who are unable to establish a shared vision create an obstacle to learning (Williams & Hierck, 2015). Different viewpoints, however, should not prevent forward movement. Strong advocates will steer forward even if they must battle against the current.

A dysfunctional school culture will create a system that maintains a learning gap and creates a toxic environment. If the culture of the school is not positive, it will be an obstacle for staff and students (Muhammad, 2009). Often, staff must battle against established institutional beliefs about what their school and students can achieve. For example, staff may be unable to work cohesively because of a perceived distinction between elementary and secondary staff. Staff may blame other staff members for the weakness of student achievements. The staff is not yet ready to work collectively until they are united in working together. A healthy school culture has staff, with a positive collective focus and purpose, who share a common vocabulary to have hard conversations. A staff climate built on trust, respect, and a willingness to share is the foundation for collaboration (Jappinen et al., 2016). A school's culture must be a positive shared vision of growth for PLCs and RTI to be successful and to avoid a toxic environment for staff and students.

### **Teachers' Attitudes Toward Change**

True collaboration of staff requires a varied staff to build a united school culture and structure despite individual strengths, weaknesses, and opinions (Buffum et al., 2012). If staff collectively have a purpose, they can act as a true compass for a school to follow toward improvement. Individual teachers can not be forced into creating a culture. Personal conflicts must be addressed through difficult conversations about what needs to be done for students. If a teacher opts out of the process, that teacher's students are not supported by the knowledge and skills of the entire school team. Staff members must be accountable and united as a part of their school's culture. Some staff may need to see results of change before they will commit to the process. Through sharing of positive outcomes and open reflection, change can be seen as being purposeful and towards improvement.

Educators' personal attitudes toward change influence the structure of collaborative groups and school culture (Muhammad, 2009). Most educators can be labeled as believers or fundamentalists. Believers have a positive view of change and are engaged daily in their quest for student success. They build a positive climate because they have high expectations for students, are committed to their jobs, and are open to learning and to implementing new strategies. Believers still need to be informed on best practices, because good intentions only are inadequate for optimal teaching (Buffum et al., 2012). Collaborative groups need to be led

by believers with a strong voice that can overpower the challenging voices. The attitude of an educator is important for change to happen.

Contrary to believers are the teachers who resist, and actively challenge change. Fundamentalists may want to protect their own views or simply do not want to change what they are doing (Muhammad, 2009). They are satisfied with what is already happening in their classrooms. For staff to collaborate, they must find a way to convince fundamentalists that change is necessary. A clear and objective appeal, from a person of trust, for change with evidence showing data, statistics, and research may show fundamentalists that change is necessary. Fundamentalists need professional development, strict monitoring, and trust building with their leaders and fellow staff. Believers must find a way to bring fundamentalists into the group so that they will “buy in” to change. A staff member may avoid attending PLC meetings and choose to not participate. However, if the educator sees a positive result of PLC and RTI, they may be more willing to try new ideas for the benefit of their students and to be “on board.” The fundamentalist maybe a challenge in the school, but will not deter change

Once staff have established a shared positive belief-based culture of collective responsibility, the school plans and reflects on how PLCs and RTI will be implemented (Williams & Hierck, 2015). The PLC establishes clear direction of student learning goals, universal assessment, and data usage for information sharing. When individual teachers use their own discretion to plan, it may lead to ineffective teaching practices and reduced teacher collaboration. Collective responsibility establishes a clear set of goals and procedures.

### **Time for Collaboration**

To accomplish planning and direction, collaboration requires appropriate scheduling and time (International Reading Association, 2010). Appropriate scheduling provides teachers time to meet during their contract hours with like-minded staff to outline evidence-based interventions concerning duration, frequency, and length of intervention sessions that apply to the scenario of a particular school (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010). Depending on the size of the school, PLC groups may be organized by grade level groups, subject area groups, or, in the case of a small school, with a vertical structure. A small school vertical structure group may include all Language Arts (LA) teachers from grades seven to twelve. At a larger high school, a PLC/RTI group may include only Grade 10 LA teachers, for example. However, often staff are not given time for collaboration. Time could be scheduled by overlapping prep times or with substitute coverage. Time, unfortunately, requires funding often not available (Katz & Sugden, 2013). A survey done in 2002 found that only one in five high school teachers regularly met to share ideas and instructional methods (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2007). Appropriate scheduling must be considered in order to make time for planning conversations.

Administrators must find creative ways to schedule collaborative time into staff schedules. Staff are not always available or willing to meet outside of school hours. One school implemented a Buddy Day system to provide a cost-free alternative to the use of substitute teacher time for class coverage during collaboration times (Ferguson, 2013). PLC meetings were held during the day for specific teacher groups. Another classroom teacher supervised the classes of the participating teachers. Teachers involved in the PLC were able to collaborate without sacrificing teaching time. However, the teachers who were called upon to supervise additional students complained of problems with the workload. Without additional funding, schools must find alternatives or be creative in finding time to collaborate.

RTI also requires flexibility or reform to school scheduling, particularly in high school scenarios, because the typical structure limits time for collaboration. It is more difficult for instructors to connect across different curriculums. Traditionally, high school teachers taught subjects, rather than students, and it is, therefore, more difficult to build collective responsibility. Successful schools can, with a strong leader, schedule collaboration time into the schedule for experimentation, reflection, peer observation, and assessment or feedback discussions to

increase teacher confidence in the necessity of collaboration (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2007). Some high schools, for example, have scheduled half days, or delayed start days to accommodate planning. Summer institutes or meetings provide teachers time to plan, but they still need time throughout the school year.

Students requiring additional supports need in-house leaders who use shared standards, vocabulary, and conversations despite different curriculum areas. Teachers need scheduled time designated for collaboration in addition to their preparation and teaching times. Collaboration must be embedded in the contract day. Meetings must be mandatory, have ground rules for expectations and behaviour, and occur frequently to be effective (Buffum, et al., 2012; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2007). Meetings need to be a time of productive conversations. Without change in scheduling, there will be no time to design collaboration.

A well-designed RTI system should be effective for about 80% of students (Harlacher, Potter, & Weber, 2014; National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010). Students moving through the RTI process into the third tier, more intensive, or tertiary level, are those students who may have a learning disability and require special education services. Initially, RTI was based on a preventative model to reduce the disproportionate numbers of minorities within special education. It was an alternative approach to determining eligibility for learning disability services, but has evolved into an initiative that focuses on optimized instruction or inclusion for all students by using research-based practices that are proven to work with most students (International Reading Association, 2010).

RTI can delay or even prevent a special education referral, and supports inclusion (Martinez & Young, 2011). RTI is comparable to Universal Design for Learning (UDL), because it also requires collaboration, which expects all students to learn through differentiation or necessary scaffolding through a three-block model or tiers of learning. Learners may be in different tiers depending on the academic areas. A student who is strong in literacy may need significant supports in numeracy. Each student was be considered individually, but improved instructional practice supports all learners (Katz & Sugden, 2013). RTI can be considered as an additional scaffold for inclusion and provide all learners with equal opportunities, if all staff are properly trained.

### **Professional Development**

To function within PLC and RTI parameters, staff need appropriate professional development (PD) and to feel competent in their RTI abilities. Teachers must be trained to use assessments effectively, to interpret data to monitor progress, and to adjust their instructions as needed (Dexter & Hughes, 2017). Some concepts may be difficult to track, and RTI requires frequent comparison of a student's expected and actual rate of learning. Monitoring helps teachers be accountable and make informed instructional choices for appropriate instruction (Dexter & Hughes, 2017).

Direct teacher training, either in-house sharing or outside consultation, on specific focus areas uniquely required by a school such as specific math or LA interventions, will improve an educator's self-perceived RTI skills and increase efficiency and collaboration (Castillo et al., 2016). In my school division, all resource teachers and school administration teams have been trained in PLC and RTI. The division has committed to training all staff over the next three years at significant cost. These leaders share their new ideas with individual school staff members to design their own unique PLC and RTI plan. PD is required for competence in RTI and it must be a financial priority.

### **Conclusion**

Collaboration is vital for a school's success. No single teacher has all of the resources necessary to change his/her school. Available time and strained resources require staff to

consider new strategies to collaborate effectively. Using PLC and RTI ideals, educators can work together to see all students reach their potential. Educators must build a positive school culture, find a shared purpose, be willing to change, find planning and reflection time, and attend relevant PD for collaboration to work. An atmosphere of trust and respect along with assertive administration may create a culture of openness to change. PLCs and RTI can act as a guiding rudder against the current. Without a rudder of purpose, educators are rowing a boat without a paddle, aimlessly drifting on the tides of change.

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