

Collaborative Practice

When and how?

Adrien Amirault, Executive Director

As we move towards the model of Strengthening Teacher Instructional Practice (STIP) as set out in the recent Memorandum of Understanding in the GNWT-NWTTA Collective Agreement, we are challenged to make good use of the 50% redirected time for Collaborative work. So what is it that makes collaborative planning successful?

Collaboration needs to be supported by the structure of the day (simply put, build time into the schedule), and by an understanding of what is meant by collaborative practice.

The STIP model will give the structure, in that it finds time, but understanding collaborative practice is the hard part.

Collaborative practice is not agreeing on the operation of the school (routines for tardiness, attendance, missed homework, discipline) even though this is important work. Rather it goes much deeper and encourages teachers to analyze their professional practice, and to work with other teachers to use this analysis to improve instruction. Good collaborative practice takes brave teachers, who are willing to expose what they do with colleagues in the hope that this will lead to improved teaching.

This is easy to say, but not easy to do. Developing strong collaborative teams takes effort. Teams must agree on norms in how they will function, must agree on measures to ensure students are learning, and must be informed by results. The work of collaborative teams must always be driven by student learning, and it is this learning (or absence of results) that drives the conversation of the team.

One example of a structure that is common in NWT schools is school-wide writes. When as a school you have a collection of writing from every student, a collaborative team might look for evidence of traits of writing that are not going well. If there is a common trait that is not strong across the writes (say ORGANIZATION), then the team needs to look at what they do to support ideas around organization in writing. This is where the bravery comes in, as it might mean admitting to yourself (and to colleagues) that you could be doing a better, or

different approach to teaching organization in your writing. It also means that if the results are not what you want, then you might need to change how you are instructing. Sometimes through the process of looking at data you might find that one teacher has had great success in teaching an aspect of writing. This is good news in a collaborative team, as that teacher becomes the model to learn from. So besides bravery, collaborative teams also need to have trust.

In the example above you are basing your ideas on evidence, and changing your teaching to see improvement in that evidence. When you do school wide writes again, you are going to look for improvement in organization the next time. It might not improve, and then it is back to the drawing board. If it does improve, find another target for improvement.

Effective collaborative practice is usually teacher lead, though school administration may direct the work of collaborative teams by asking/directing teams to focus on certain aspects of curriculum (e.g. numeracy). But the hard work of looking at what you do is the work of a teacher. There is an element of trust in collaborative teams as you need to admit when things are not going well. This sometimes is difficult when a supervisor is part of the team. The aspect of trust is important.

Research supports collaborative practice in schools as among the most effective practice to improve teaching. So grab a colleague, be brave, trust each other, and start a conversation.



Representatives of the NWTTA, ECE and the NWT Superintendents' Association worked collaboratively over many months to agree on how best to roll out the Strengthening Teacher Instructional Practices MOU.