

New Leader

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Beyond Professional Learning Communities

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As we know, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are very useful meetings for teaching staff. They can make a commitment to help the school to move toward a shared vision and identify objectives that enhance the learning of all students. These meetings provide teachers with an opportunity to share and harmonize their practices and discuss their students and data. PLCs give teachers time to talk about strategies that work and strategies that don't. These meetings reinforce teamwork, cooperation, and leadership. They enable schools to develop evaluations, discuss the marking system, define teaching tasks, and, most importantly, focus on the success of all students.

Because PLCs are so effective in improving the teamwork between teachers and identifying strategies and ideas for our students, we need to maintain them and continue to refine them. Given the fact that we want to place higher priority on learning, we see the need for a model that more effectively meets the needs and learning styles of students.

We see a logical extension of the PLCs, with the possibility of greater learner involvement, that is to say, the creation of a peer learning community. We believe that this model, called Student Teams (STs), embodies learning and teamwork. It nevertheless requires structure and parameters.

Below, we identify activities that have been tried in a number of classrooms. With the help of innovative teachers, these activities point the way to a new model for learning. With STs, the teacher's role is to motivate the students and spark their interest by offering them activities that will challenge them to achieve to their full potential. We want students to take charge of their learning and become self-motivated. The teacher's role is also to lead discussions and act as a role model, enabling the students to interact appropriately and learn from each other. The teacher harnesses the spirit of the class, which becomes "the team."

In STs, students discuss what they need to work on and what their peers need to work on. Naturally, in the beginning, the teacher talks about a shared vision and the importance of ensuring that each student is successful. This is achieved by all of the students helping each other and respecting each other.

Each classroom must become a team that teaches and espouses these five key practices:

1. Trusting the other students; being able to say which subject I am having difficulty with or being able to say that I need help so that I can get help.
2. Having crucial conversations during our meetings and discussions. Being able to express my point of view, even when it is different from the majority view, and respecting the opinions of others. Being able to discuss important issues.
3. Getting involved and having clarity in the classroom around the priorities that have been established.
4. Being accountable. Having high expectations. Not tolerating behaviour that is not conducive to the team operating smoothly.
5. Paying attention to results. Placing importance on teamwork, the success of the group as a whole, and the achievement of goals.

Each student is able to express himself or herself. Each student is able to take charge of his or her learning and academic success. Each student is able to help the other students. Initially, when STs are created, the teacher does a lot of modelling, guiding the students so that they learn to cooperate and work as a team. For example, after one student has done a presentation, the teacher can ask another student to tell the class what he or she understood from

the presentation.

The other students will become aware of the complexities of communication and of the fact that we do not all understand messages in the same way. They will have to pay attention to what their peers are saying in order to fully understand and respect the views or syntheses of the other students. If they are intrigued by the points of view of the other students, they will no doubt modify their own views of an event or situation. Through teamwork, they will constantly be making connections. What a wonderful way to learn!

The points of view of others are crucial to our ability to make connections with what we believe. This process enables us to change our thinking if we feel the need to. STs make it possible to create a stimulating environment in which students feel supported and are encouraged to work as a team. The students feel that their efforts will improve not only their own learning, but that of the other students as well.

The students feel that they are part of a real team and that the ideas that they contribute are important and even crucial for their peers. Students enjoy working toward common goals; hence, they prefer working with their peers to working alone. With STs, students want to continually find new ways of learning and interacting with their peers so that they can keep learning. They do not accept the status quo. When they share their ideas, they innovate and apply things in ways that they could not do if they were working alone.

Naturally, PLCs must continue so that teachers can continue to develop their own tools and then help their students to develop tools and find strategies to improve the STs.

STs help schools to:

- prioritize teamwork;
- focus more on using teamwork to achieve a common goal, with help and support;
- prioritize learning;
- prioritize results rather than activities;
- focus on individualized and differentiated learning that will enable each student to make progress.

In order to help all students, particularly students with learning or behavioural challenges, the teaching staff must meet often (PLC) in order to support each other and adopt winning strategies. The professional dialogue of the cooperation teams makes it possible to identify best practices for helping every student in the school. The teachers, the resource teacher, the kindergarten teacher, and the school principal help to find solutions and initiatives that will be effective. We need a lot of resources, such as specialists. Even parents can help many students to make progress.

Students experiencing difficulty also encounter difficulties outside the classroom, perhaps in Physical Education, Art or Science. This is why it is important for all of the staff at the school to be aware of the challenges of the students at the school, e.g., those who have an IEP, those who need additional time or those who have special needs. At a minimum, they must have had an opportunity to read the recommendations made by the previous year's teacher.

Who better to help students than the students themselves? Some students listen harder and learn more when another student explains how he or she solved a program or writes the process on the blackboard. We have great resources in our schools; the key is to use them. We need to give students opportunities to express themselves; in so doing, they will develop their ability at synthesis, their oral communication skills, their active listening skills, and the ability to take a position. According to the ST model, students are our greatest asset!

Lastly, we believe that when schools and classes decide to go ahead and adopt a model such as the Student Team model, it only reinforces such concepts as respect, character development, listening, cooperation, self-esteem, and oral communication, which are the foundation of any literacy program.

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Multi-grade Classes

Multi-grade classes are increasingly commonplace. The Student Team (ST) model can also be beneficial here. For example:

- During an ST meeting or discussion in a mixed Grade 3-Grade 4 class, a Grade 4 student may tell a Grade 3 student that he liked the way in which the other student read but that he could improve his pronunciation with liaison—the fluid linking of words in French.

- A Grade 3 student may tell a Grade 4 student that she thinks the other student is really good at Math but should raise her hand instead of calling out the answer, because the other students have the right to speak, too.

- The teacher must do a lot of modelling, creating an atmosphere of respect and a thirst for learning. The students must trust each other and learn to accept constructive criticism that will make them better students.

- This type of discussion is already happening in many classrooms that have created a cooperation council. However, STs go much further. For example, thanks to the important discussions that take place with an ST, students improve, the class functions better, and there is greater accountability in respect of a predetermined priority. With STs, the class becomes a team.