



## Why Educators Should Be Given Time to Collaborate

A Board of Education had asked the educators in its district to justify why they should be given time during their contractual day to collaborate rather than simply do so on their own time. The Board felt that the key to improving student achievement is to maximize teacher time in the classroom.

Here is my response:

1. Time spent in collaboration with colleagues is considered essential to success in most professions. The law firm that represented our school district when I was superintendent required all of its attorneys to meet on a weekly basis to review the issues and strategies of the various cases that had been assigned to individual members. Each attorney presented the facts of the case and his or her thoughts on how to proceed. The others offered advice and challenges and shared their experience and insight. Our Board of Education never considered this collaboration as inappropriate. In fact, our members would have been very upset if the advice they received had been limited to the perspective of a single member rather than the collective expertise of the entire firm. When our school district underwent construction, our Board expected the architectural firm to work as a team to design our new

buildings. Furthermore, they expected those architects to collaborate on a regular basis with the managers of the construction company that did the work. Had the firm not engaged in such collaborative efforts, we would have questioned both their judgment and their effectiveness. When I went for a comprehensive physical examination, a doctor who looked at one of the test results initially recommended that I undergo an immediate angioplasty. Prior to moving forward, however, he consulted with two other doctors and concluded the procedure was not necessary as long as I engaged in alternative treatments. I did not question his taking the time to consult with others. Educators are professionals, and they too benefit from the insight, expertise, and collective efforts of a team of colleagues. Collaboration is not a frill: it is an essential element of professional practice.

2. The research base in support of collaboration is extensive both inside and outside education. The collaborative team has been called the fundamental building block of a learning organization, and the link between a collaborative culture and school improvement is well

established. No district should disregard the compelling evidence that collaboration represents best practice as long as people demonstrate the discipline to collaborate about the right things.

3. American educators are often criticized because their students do not score as well as Asian students on international tests. The workweek of Japanese

teachers is similar to American teachers in terms of the number of hours at work, but the time spent in front of students in the classroom is considerably less. In Japan, it is understood

and accepted that a teacher who is working with colleagues to perfect a lesson or review examples of student work is engaged in highly productive activities that have a positive impact on student achievement.

4. Lew Gerstner, the former chairman of IBM, was asked if he felt the key to improving American schools was simply extending the time teachers spend in the classroom—more time on task, longer school days, longer school years. Gerstner pointed out that the United States has created a system that impacts students for 13 years (grades K-12), yet approximately one of every four students

who enters the system fails to complete it (that is, they drop out). Furthermore, many of those who do complete 12th grade are incapable of doing what the system was designed to ensure they could do. Gerstner insisted that if IBM found that one of every four of its computers failed to reach the end of the assembly line, and many of those who did could not do what the computer was designed to do, IBM would not solve the problem by running the assembly line more hours in the day or more days in the year. They would have people sit down together and determine more effective ways to achieve the intended objective.

5. Finally, organizations demonstrate their priorities by the way in which they utilize their resources. Time is one of the most precious resources in a school. In light of the strong correlation between meaningful collaboration and improved student achievement, it would be disingenuous for any Board to argue that it wants better results but is unwilling to provide this important cost-neutral resource to achieve them.

“Collaboration is not a frill: it is an essential element of professional practice.”