



STRATEGIES

PLC PRACTITIONER TIM BROWN OFFERS
STRATEGIES FOR COLLABORATIVE TEAMS



Establishing a collaborative culture requires much more than just finding time to meet.

The fourth presentation in SCO E's Leadership Series provided participating schools and districts with specific strategies and processes for building collaborative teams at their sites. Presenter Tim Brown, retired principal of Campbell Elementary School in Missouri, successfully implemented collaborative practices at his school via the professional learning communities (PLC) model. Brown began his presentation by reflecting on his school's journey to improve student achievement.

"We were very good with the *heart about kids*," he said, "but until we started focusing on standards, narrowing our curriculum, and creating a list of what we were going to start doing and what we were going to stop doing, we didn't move forward.

"I worked with the people at this school for seven years—not in charge of them, but *with* them. During that time, we moved from collegiality to collaboration to developing intervention and support for kids.

"We started with 35 percent of our students at grade level in reading and asked ourselves, 'Are we doing what we should be doing?' By taking action in response to this question, we reached 68 percent of students reading at grade level. In mathematics, we moved from 47 to 97 percent. That's how we received recognition as the most improved school in Missouri."

Brown went on to lead seminar participants through a series of strategy exercises that were successful at his school. This issue of the SCO E Bulletin highlights the strategies he outlined to support six key steps of collaboration.

Creating a collaborative culture: Establishing a collaborative culture requires much more than just finding time to meet. Brown cited *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by Patrick Lencioni, which describes trust as the foundation for effective



SETTING THE STAGE

To begin the conversation about collaborative culture, schools are encouraged to chart their responses to the following questions in order to bring focus and direction to their work.

- What are some things we are good at?
- What are some things we are great at?
- What are some things we need to stop doing?
- What are some things we need to start doing?
- What do we celebrate?

The exercise facilitates individual understanding of personal style and its impact on group dynamics.

Compass Points goes like this. Referencing a chart with the following descriptors, participants are asked to identify which direction—North, South, East, or West—most resembles their individual style.

- **North**—*Acting: Let's do it!* Likes to act, try things, plunge in.
- **South**—*Caring.* Likes to know that everyone's feelings have been taken into consideration, that their voices have been heard, before acting.
- **East**—*Speculating.* Likes to look at the big picture, the possibilities, before acting.
- **West**—*Paying attention to detail.* Likes to know the who, what, when, where, why before acting.

Team members divide into groups according to their style and discuss these prompts: What are the strengths of your style? What are the limitations? What style do you find the most difficult to work with? What do other people need to know about you so we can work together more effectively?

A reporter for each style shares the group's responses and the whole team debriefs.

collaboration. Trust, says Lencioni, is built through “shared experiences over time, multiple instances of follow-through and credibility, and an in-depth understanding of the unique attributes of team members.”

Strategy—One activity for developing trust and mutual respect is called “Compass Points.” Brown highly recommends this exercise as it provides an accurate picture of each member's strengths and limitations at the same time that it helps team leaders determine the best way to set up and manage processes.

Shaping a team vision: “Creating a collaborative culture is a journey that begins with a shared understanding of where you want to go,” said Brown. “It is fueled by a continuous process of building the *skill* and the *will* to share responsibility for the success of all learners.” Creating a team vision of where you want to be is an important step in this process.

Brown maintains that engaging teachers and administrators in collaborative work demands that the “right” culture be established at the school and that the purpose of the collaboration be clear. To illustrate clarity of purpose, he referenced Jim Collins' book, *Good to Great*, which defines a mission statement as a “big, hairy, audacious goal”—for example, our school will be the best school in the county. Principals must facilitate agreement about their school's mission, as well as the grading policies, content standards, and assessments that are related to it.

Strategy—How do you attain agreement? Brown suggests a process of writing “collective commitments.” Here, staff members decide on one commitment they can make for each related aspect of the mission. Teachers write their commitments on sticky-notes, then post them on charts around the room. The commitments are read aloud and a master list is created, then periodically revisited as the school's collaborative work progresses.

Selecting the content of collaboration: Collaborative work at schools should be centered on learning, not teaching, says Brown. With learning as the touchstone, curriculum, assessment, instruction, and environment become primary areas of focus. Four corollary questions can help drive the collaboration:

- What do we want students to learn?
- How will we know that they have learned it?
- What will we do if they don't?
- What will we do if they do?

“Working together to improve student achievement becomes the routine work of everyone in the school,” Brown said. “Every teacher team participates in the process of identifying the current level of student achievement, establishing a goal to improve the current level, working together to achieve that goal, and providing periodic evidence of progress.” The teams are judged on the results of their collaboration—that is, on the changes that occur because of their work.

Strategy—In a collaborative culture, communication is key. Brown uses a “communication audit” to help teams develop shared understanding and

direction for their work. He has printed these seven audit questions on a business card that he carries with him in his travels:

1. What do we plan for?
2. What do we monitor?
3. What do we model?
4. What questions do we ask?
5. How do we allocate time?
6. What do we celebrate?
7. What are we willing to confront?

Brown addressed the term “monitor” directly, noting that while the word sometimes carries negative connotations, monitoring is how schools know if their planning is having an impact. “Only by keeping track of data can we determine if our students are progressing toward achievement targets,” he said.

He recommended “carousel brainstorming” to engage staff in picturing what collaborative practices would look like at their sites. Here, each of the seven communication audit questions is written on chart paper and posted around the room. Participants rotate around the charts in two-minute intervals, writing a response to each question and moving on to the next until the “carousel” has completed one rotation. The whole group then reconvenes and debriefs to identify areas of strength for celebration and areas of challenge for growth.

Building consensus: When collaborating, arriving at consensus is essential. There are five common barriers that can waylay school consensus-building efforts:

- Going it alone, rather than building a coalition.
- Using a forum that’s ill suited to dialogue.
- Pooling opinions, rather than building shared knowledge.
- Attempting to reach consensus at too detailed a level.
- Investing too much energy in resisters.

Brown believes that there are just two essential criteria for consensus—first, that all voices are heard and, second, that the will of the group is apparent. When groups are seeking consensus, it’s important to first unearth all concerns relative to the issue. Dividing the team into groups to list pros or cons is one way to reveal concerns and make the implications of consensus transparent to all stakeholders.

Strategy—To build consensus, Brown often implements a “fist-to-five approach,” using a show of hands to indicate level of support on a zero-to-five scale where a closed fist equals no support and five fingers is full support. This process is effective because it’s quick, it’s visual, and every stakeholder sees the result. Once the will of the group is clear, Brown believes that facilitators should *not* ask resisters to elaborate on their position. The group’s directive is to move forward on the decision.

To evaluate their decision-making process and ensure that it is transparent and inclusive, teams can ask: Did we build shared knowledge regarding best practice? Did we honestly assess our current reality? Did we ensure all points of view were heard? Was the will of the group evident to those who oppose it? If the answer to all of these questions is yes, Brown maintains that the team should “go for it!”

Dealing with resistance: What do you do about resisters?

Strategy—Kerry Patterson, author of *Crucial Conversations*, offers six steps for dialogues with resisters on topics that can’t be avoided or ignored—for example, talking to a teacher who has not given a benchmark test or refuses to collect data on student progress.

1. Clarify what you want and don’t want to result from the conversation.
2. Attempt to find mutual purpose.
3. Create a safe environment for honest dialogue.



OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Brainstorm a list of barriers, then assign one barrier for each group to assess. The group writes the barrier—for example, “time constraints”—in the middle of a large piece of paper, then draws lines radiating out from the center so there is a pie-shaped section for each member of the group.

Sitting around a table, each person writes a response to the first question below, then the paper is rotated and the next question is answered.

- What is true about this barrier for education?
- What is the counter-argument to that perspective?
- What points could be made to help staff understand the new, more desired perspective?
- What are two things we could do to support teachers in integrating this idea?
- What resources will staff need?
- Can we manage “changing” this perspective? If so, what will it take? If not, what will we do?

The process continues until all six questions have been addressed. The groups share and debrief, then use the ideas generated to move forward.

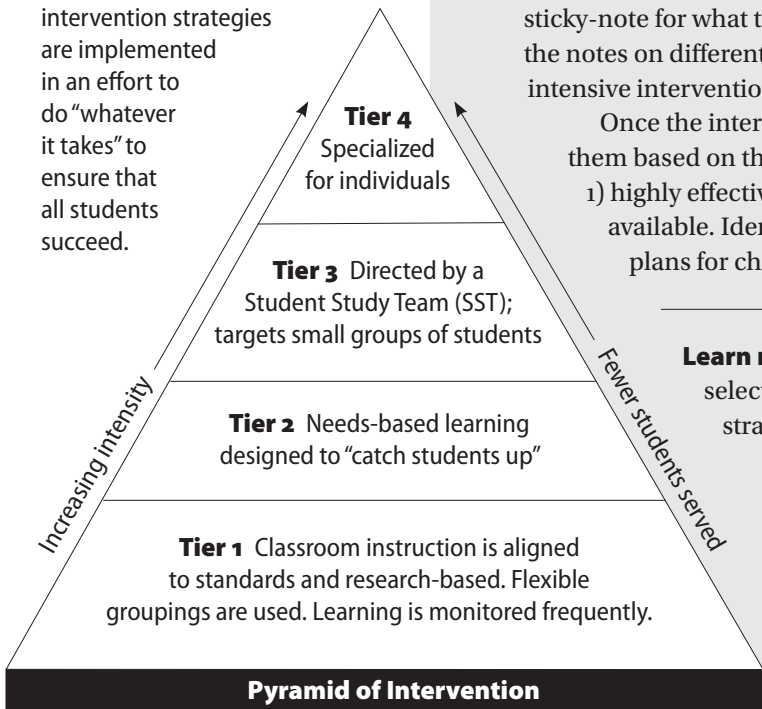


Tim Brown

PYRAMID OF INTERVENTION

A “pyramid of intervention” provides tiers of support, moving from standards-based classroom learning to needs-based learning, then to SST-driven learning and, finally, specially designed learning. As the intensity of the intervention increases, fewer students are served.

Tim Brown characterized effective intervention as a journey that is ongoing. Creating collaboration doesn’t happen overnight and the journey is never really complete. New students arrive, staff changes occur, and goals are adjusted. If students continue to struggle, new intervention strategies are implemented in an effort to do “whatever it takes” to ensure that all students succeed.



4. Use facts.
5. Share the thought process that has led you to the conversation.
6. Encourage the recipient to share their facts and thought processes.

Brown suggests using a “critical conversation observation tool” to record the components of the dialogue. A sheet of paper with six boxes allows for note-taking related to each of the steps.

Ensuring that all students succeed: Collaboration can greatly enhance intervention efforts and ensure that every student succeeds. Tim Brown challenged participants to “imagine the possibilities” of what a team of teachers or an entire school could do to address the needs of struggling students, compared to what a single teacher can do.

Effective intervention requires that schools have a system to detect student needs and provide instructional assistance in response to performance on common assessments. Support and time are variables, while learning is kept constant—and failure is not an option. Brown compared effective intervention to cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) because it is:

- **Urgent**—Occurs immediately after a formative assessment.
- **Directive**—Not invitational; students must participate.
- **Timely**—Occurs right away and provides extended learning time during the school day.
- **Targeted**—Students who don’t do their work are provided with different interventions than students who lack the skills.
- **Administered by trained professionals**—Teachers run the intervention, not volunteers.
- **Systematic**—Students are identified and monitored and plans are revised every 3-4 weeks to meet individual student needs.

Strategy—Draw a large triangle on a poster to represent a pyramid of intervention. List intervention options currently in place. Use one color sticky-note for what teachers do and another color for schoolwide efforts. Put the notes on different levels of the pyramid. At the bottom tier, put the least intensive interventions. At the top, put the most intensive interventions.

Once the interventions are identified and ranked by intensity, rate them based on their impact on student learning. Use a four-point scale: 1) highly effective, 2) partially effective, 3) not effective, or 4) no data available. Identify areas of strength and weakness, then begin making plans for change where it’s needed. ♦

Learn more: Find a video clip of Tim Brown’s presentation, selections from his PowerPoint show, and handouts for his strategy exercises on the SCOE website, www.scoe.org.



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