Collaboration, a term increasingly discussed and woven into schools’ vision statements and districts’ plans, has sparked thought-provoking questions. What does effective collaboration in schools look like? How do educators explain the benefits of shifting from classic teaching, with an individualist focus, to the cooperative learning processes, where students share a vested interest in each other’s learning?

The Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21) identifies collaboration as one of the 4 Cs—along with creativity, communication, and critical thinking—essential for college and career readiness. To address educators’ desire for deeper understanding, P21 published a research report, What We Know about Collaboration. The report explains that collaborative competence is not something students learn on their own without guidance, practice, and opportunities to observe adult role models collaborate. P21 defines collaboration as:

- **Demonstrating** the ability to work effectively and respectfully with diverse teams;
- **Exercising** flexibility and willingness to be helpful in making necessary compromises to accomplish a common goal;
- **Assuming** shared responsibility for collaborative work; and
- **Valuing** the individual contributions made by each team member.

When schools intentionally focus on the P21 four-part definition of collaboration, and leaders articulate a clear expectation that interactions among teachers, students, and community members/parents will follow this definition, it changes the culture and outcomes for the entire learning community.

**Teacher Collaboration: Scaffolding to a Higher Level of Partnership**

Principals have found that art integration is a natural catalyst for increasing collaboration in schools—starting with faculty and organically spreading to students. By its nature, art integration is cross-disciplinary. So the most effective way to implement this teaching strategy is to bring together the expertise of art teachers, other subject matter experts, and classroom teachers.

Lusher Charter School in New Orleans credits its intense faculty collaboration to having on staff five...
Art teachers (music, theater, dance, and visual art) and an arts-integration specialist, who use a collaborative decision-making process to craft the school’s curriculum and help colleagues implement it. “Art integration is deeply embedded in our school’s 30-year history,” said principal Sheila Nelson. “We are very intentional about how teachers work together, helping them move up the continuum of collaboration.” Nelson outlined the scaffold of collaboration:

1. **Observation.** The most basic level is “You teach—I watch” or “I teach—you watch.” It is passive collaboration. Teachers can learn by watching a role model, but minimal growth results when they have limited interaction or partnership.

2. **Parallel teaching.** Teachers divide students into two groups; each teaches half then they switch. Multiple disciplines are covered, but not as powerfully as when teachers truly collaborate in planning and implementing, which increases their cross-disciplinary knowledge.

3. **Partner teaching.** This is the highest level of collaboration. Optimal team teaching involves time to co-plan, co-teach, and co-evaluate. There is so much alignment that the classroom teacher and art teacher can finish each other’s sentences, speaking comfortably about the standards in the other’s disciplines.

Articulating the levels of collaboration helps faculty aspire to use arts integration with rigor and authentically meet all disciplines’ standards. “My job, as principal, is to give them time together,” Nelson explained. “We bring in substitutes so the art and classroom teachers can have deep, meaningful collaborations.” She said teachers use Google Docs to keep communication going outside of their face-to-face time together. “Tech collaboration can’t stand alone as the collaboration tool, but it enhances and extends conversations that are rooted in personal meetings.”

Lusher Charter School students embark on robust, cross-disciplinary projects such as the “Study of Change” and “Diary of a Journey.” Students’ collaborative work is inspired by the faculty role models they see constantly communicating, co-planning, and refining.

**At the “Blair Fair” community celebration, scout leaders and Blair Dual Language School students design a sailboat challenge.**

**Art Integration Inspires Creative Connections With Families**

When the creative leadership team at Coronita Elementary School in Corona, California, decided to use art integration to bring project-based learning to life in the Title I school, it involved parents. “We wanted to be relevant and systematic in using art integration. We offered arts-infused professional development for teachers and wanted to share these best teaching practices with parents,” explained principal Kevin Kazala. The creative leadership team developed a rotating art box that goes home with a child for several days, giving the family time to have guided artful discussions and work on a collaborative art project.

The results far exceeded the school’s expectations. “When children returned with the art box they were beaming with pride and excitement. They shared the family’s art and provided oral presentations rich in art-based vocabulary,” said Lysa Ashley, a member of the creative leadership team. “We’ve been surprised how seriously families took this and how engaged the parents have been—contributing to the planning sketchbook and the final art project.”

When children take the art box home, they guide their family through the exploration, using the step-by-step photos. Family members use the sketchbook to plan their collaborative art project and write responses to the prompts that ask which artist inspired them and why, and what they learned about an artist and themselves during
this creative, collaborative project. “We are in awe of how impactful the family engagement has been around these art box projects,” Kazala said.

**Community Collaborations Reach New Heights**

Innovative teaching and learning can take a village. Darrin Jennings, principal of Rawlins Elementary School in Wyoming, widened the lens to see who in their community could help overcome geographic barriers of rural isolation. “We are a two-hour drive from the closest community that has a significant size population, but we knew partners could help us close that gap,” he said.

The school’s focus on art integration led it to potential partners the school had not considered before—including the Wyoming Arts Council, Sinclair Oil and Gas, and the University of Wyoming’s Art Mobile. Jennings outlined the principles he believes are important in growing strong community collaborations:

- **Let them know** how important their role is and elevate them—draw them into the cause without whining about what you don’t have.
- **Show community collaborators** how much you value their contributions—they all report to someone and most organizations have a board. When you find a strong partner, let the boss know how much that person’s work means to the community.
- **Ask yourself,** “What’s the worst thing that can happen if we ask for help and they don’t give it?” If you hear “not now,” understand that doesn’t mean never.
- **Establish relationships.** Let them see the great work you’re doing. Build upon that over time. Community organizations that don’t have funds to help your program may know about other sources of funding and recommend grants you can pursue.
- **Understand the intersection** between your needs and their goals. Start by learning about the potential collaborative organization’s objectives. Don’t frame the conversation around your needs gap—talk about shared interests in community outcomes and how they will benefit from helping you.

This advice to principals who seek community collaborations is echoed by Donna Marie Cozine, principal of Renaissance Academy Charter School of the Arts in Rochester, New York. She received support from J.C. Penney and Young Audiences to host an Arts Integration Symposium that helps schools understand the transformative power of art across the curriculum.

“As an inner city school with 93 percent free and reduced lunch, we were convinced by the data that art integration increases test scores. We asked for the community’s help with resources so we could ‘double-down’ on art integration and show others how it works,” Cozine explained.

One of her favorite schoolwide arts-integration units is “Change Begins with Me.” This concept of individual impact works in student lessons and in teacher professional development. “We ask students to analyze data on student collaboration. Our third-graders did a school culture survey and used the information to strengthen collaboration among students. Students mirror the positive partnership mindset they see among our teachers and with community organizations,” Cozine stated.

The power of collaboration to transform schools is punctuated by Miami University’s teacher preparation program. They created a Study of Transformation initiative to assess, over five years, the impact of art integration and early immersion of college students into classrooms to enhance their art teacher preparation program. Professor Stephanie Danker, principal researcher in the study, works closely with Ridgeway Elementary School in Hamilton, Ohio.

Danker reports that “One of the most significant and underutilized community collaborations for schools are their local universities—particularly those involved in teacher training. We worked with Ridgeway’s principal, Kathy Wagonfield, to move the teacher preparation model away from a culminating student teaching experience. Instead we built the expectation into the next generation of art teachers that they will transform schools by collaborating, on a routine basis, with classroom teachers.” Given the power of collaboration within and beyond schools, it’s exciting to see how new teachers are being prepared to meet principals’ expectations, ready to bring the collaborative mindset as they enter the field.

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