Lesson Study Communities: Increasing Achievement with Diverse Students

~ Research Roundup » Volume 24, Number 2, Winter 2008


The focus on student learning through staff collaboration discussed in Lesson Study Communities fits well within a discussion of professional learning communities (PLCs). Authors Karen Wiburg and Susan Brown talk about efforts to introduce the Japanese method of lesson study to U.S. schools. While the focus of the project was math instruction at the middle school level, their suggestions and lessons learned would apply across grade levels and content areas. They describe the lesson-study approach used in their project this way:

Teachers work together in teams to consider an area of interest or difficulty in mathematics for their students. The teachers develop student goals, research together the math content, and carefully plan a lesson. The lesson is taught by one of the teachers and observed by the team, who gather data about how the lesson is going. Following this observation ... the group gathers to debrief on what happened, and to plan for possible changes through the next cycle of reflection.

Barriers to adopting a lesson-study approach are identified along with suggestions of how to overcome them. Two of the suggestions could apply equally to efforts to implement a PLC—and specifically to encourage teachers to break out of the closed-door classroom mode. First, teachers involved in the project “had very little experience working together in substantive ways. They expressed reluctance about sharing lessons, and held tightly to special lessons that they had developed through their own hard work on their own. They focused on lessons as individual endeavors.”

Second, the teachers often associated observation with evaluation and “were uncomfortable at first in letting other teachers and observers into their classrooms.”

Wiburg and Brown suggest that an important first step is “assessing the conditions that support teacher collaboration.” In their view, “if teachers are not willing to work together and trust each other, it will be difficult to engage them in the lesson-study process.” Thus, as principal, you may need to provide opportunities for teachers to work together in ways that build trust. Another important precondition is leadership. Finally, active participation in the lesson-study approach is more likely if there at least a few teachers with a strong conviction that the process can have a significant impact on student learning and who are willing to “sell” their beliefs to others.