

Collaboration: Learning to Work Together

The Purpose and Impact of Collaborative Work

Written by Cheri Sterman

Embedding any transformative schoolwide change requires time and a nurturing environment. Once a learning community commits to improving schoolwide collaboration, it grows like Chinese bamboo. Picture a seed tenderly planted in an environment rich with fertile soil, water, and sunshine. One year goes by with no visible sign of growth. Two, three, even four years pass, yet still the bamboo is focusing all its energy underground, building a root system. Bamboo takes constant nurturing in that supportive environment for a full five years before signs of growth visibly emerge. Then *voilà*, the plant grows 80 feet in six weeks!

Why is collaboration a skill and a mindset that must be learned? Organizations including the Partnership for 21st Century Learning and the World Economic Forum report that one of the most valued skills employers look for in employees is the ability to collaborate. Gone are the days of workers performing solo, mindless tasks. Artificial intelligence has made it possible for robots to assume those duties. Employees now must solve problems within teams. Skills that are foundational to this work include intentional listening, problem-finding, and perspective-shifting. Mindsets move from “me” to “we” with shared accountability. While teaching and learning how to be collaborative can be challenging, it is also rewarding. David Brooks, author



of the bestseller *The Second Mountain*, reports deeper satisfaction results as individuals shift from ego-driven goals to serving others. Exemplary communities of practice share ways to deepen collaboration among faculty, between teachers and families, and within student peer groups.

Fostering Collaborative Mindsets and Behaviors Among Faculty

Schoolwide collaboration requires intentionality and accountability. Every school has self-formed groups of like-minded colleagues. However, schoolwide collaboration requires inclusive and meaningful ways

of working beyond those narrow groups. Adrienne Hill, principal of Hedgepeth-Williams Middle School of the Arts in Trenton, New Jersey, has a theater background and knows the power of collaboration in orchestrating outstanding performance. Hill has found that the teachers who are most collaborative with colleagues and families achieve the greatest results with students. She reports that the correlation is no coincidence.

“It’s all about being excited to hear others’ ideas. There is an authenticity in being curious and open that enables educators to build deep relationships with students and the entire learning community.”



Courageous Conversations and Taking Perspective

Changing the way educators collaborate in schools involves more than being friendly. Not all topics educators need to address are easy or comfortable—yet those awkward discussions are often the most important. Collaboration does not mean merely being congenial. Often, people are “too nice” to address the real issues. creatED schools, including Hedgepeth-Williams, use the practice of Making Thinking Visible to surface the “elephant in the room” and help others see a perspective they had not considered.

In a staff meeting, ask your faculty to sketch responses to prompts such as “What do our current levels of collaboration look like?” or “What culture norms do we need to establish to foster more inclusive camaraderie that reaches beyond personal friendships?” Simple images can help faculty visualize the goal of establishing more effective professional relationships. Hand-drawn, heartfelt pictures help teachers see others’ perspectives and spark courageous conversations that otherwise might not have occurred.

Mapping Collaboration on a Continuum

To help teachers see the current levels of collaboration and visualize which higher levels are possible, use a visual mapping exercise. Ask faculty to “make thinking visible” by sketching what four levels on a collaboration continuum would look like. When creatED schools in Livingston, New Jersey, did this, their sketches sparked conversations about what is and is not working as they generated definitions of what each of the four levels of collaboration means to them.

Collaboration With Families

Hill emphasizes the importance of faculty collaborating with families as the only way to reach the educational goals they share. She is passionate about including families as co-educators and ensuring that the school radiates a welcoming environment where families feel they belong. “Everyone must know how they belong and what they contribute to the whole. Parents and other relatives have important contributions, especially with our school’s goal of being culturally responsive. We have a mantra that helps families connect with school—‘Be who you are and bridge

this with where you came from’—as a way of honoring families’ strengths.”

The school has a Cultural Gallery displaying art and artifacts that represent the students’ diverse countries of origin. The exhibition helps families connect with the school and serves as a springboard for parents to join classrooms as co-educators, explaining the meanings and customs behind each piece. “When educators are intentional about bringing families into school as experts—to share their first languages, nations’ history, geography, and ecosystems—and celebrate their cultural experiences, it helps all students figure out who they are,” Hill explains.

Teaching Collaboration to Students

Renewed emphasis on social and emotional learning has provided a natural home for when and how students learn collaboration skills and mindsets. Successful collaboration requires reflection on social and emotional competencies. Self-awareness, intentional listening, and seeking to understand others’ perspectives are important elements in collaborative relationships, regardless of age or setting.

Hillside Elementary School has established Caring Communities, mixed grade-level teams that stay together for the six years students are enrolled in the school. Within these multi-age teams, the focus is on a growth mindset, empathy, and collaboration—the school’s core social and emotional learning goals. A team of teachers co-plans the schoolwide experiences for the Caring Communities in which kindergartners help fifth-graders and vice versa. This school has used the creatED SEEK™ protocol to read art for insights. They use slightly modified questions for their Caring Communities growth mindset work.

“Understanding others is not an age-bound skill,” principal Carlos Gramata

SEEK:

Ask students to do interpersonal/intrapersonal reflection to build self-awareness and empathy, which are foundational collaboration skills.

SEE:

What do you see (within yourself or others)?

EVIDENCE:

What is your evidence?

EXPLAIN:

What challenges are you or the other person facing? Explain your feelings and mindset and how you can grow.

KNOW:

What do you know and want to know about assessing the situation, conquering challenges, and setting goals?

Hillside Elementary modified the SEEK™ protocol they learned in the creatED course to focus on self-awareness and collaboration.

explains. “Observing students teach each other and build close bonds across grade levels, as they remain in those family-like groupings for their entire Hillside experience, strengthens their sense of self and their understanding of others in deeply meaningful ways.”

Epiphanies Abound in Collaborative Circles

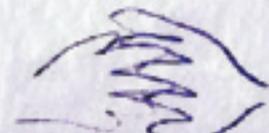
Educators who intentionally focus on increasing collaboration with colleagues notice exciting “aha” moments that overcome the feeling of isolation that plagues teachers. Teachers in Riviera Beach Elementary School in Pasadena, Maryland, take collaboration to new heights as they

Four-Step Collaboration Continuum



1. Cooperating:

- Respond to others' requests (often schedules, playground duty, or sharing supplies).
- Establish relationships based on friendships or with teachers whose rooms are close by.
- Share ideas and resources with those who are like-minded.



2. Coordinating:

- Anticipate others' needs.
- Support each other's willingness to take informed risks.
- Celebrate others' successes.
- Find joyous moments and vignettes to share with others.
- Work within and beyond typical grade-level (horizontal) teams.
- Look at situations from another's lens.



3. Co-planning:

- Tackle the tough stuff together.
- Leverage each other's expertise.
- Co-design experiences that meet aligned goals.
- Solve problems with people in ways that go beyond traditional relationships (in vertical as well as horizontal teams and with community leaders beyond school walls).
- Serve as role models that others observe.
- Demonstrate why and how collaborative work is essential.



4. Collective responsibility:

- Consistently implement the school vision.
- Help colleagues and families customize creative teaching strategies to fit various learning styles.
- Embrace shared accountability.
- Trust each other enough to openly challenge ideas and admit vulnerabilities.
- Articulate solutions with a whole-school lens rather than as an individual classroom.

5 Tips for Effective Collaboration

Never take for granted that just because people want to collaborate, they will know how. These five steps can help guide the collaborative process:

1. Align on Common Goals.

Everyone must know the goals and how they can contribute in order for collaborators to achieve.

2. Establish Norms.

Before conflicts and challenges emerge, be prepared with a shared leadership approach to finding solutions. People are more likely to follow rules or norms they have a voice in setting.

3. Acknowledge the Interdependence.

- Routinely talk about how working together adds new perspectives and enriches the work.
- Recognize that adding more decision-makers increases different points of view.
- Relish diversity of thought.
- Revisit some ideas later. Put them in a “parking lot” so they don’t distract from urgent work that must move forward first.

4. Reflect on the Process and Results.

Effective teams share collective accountability. Clarify how collaborative work will be assessed and provide opportunities to reflect on the process of working together, as well as results.

5. Celebrate Success.

Demonstrate a growth mindset. Encourage collaborators to take informed risks, learn from mistakes, and celebrate each other’s successes.

co-plan, co-teach, and support each other using arts integration. The school’s new principal, John Wojtila, shares his delight in observing how the arts-integration program has made the staff feel so connected: “Teachers here work together, not in isolation. Collaboration, when implemented at this level, minimizes burn.”

Lacey Sheppard, the school’s arts-integration specialist, explains how their arts-integration collaboration works: “We use the ‘push in’ instead of ‘pull out’ approach of bringing two educators in the same room as co-instructors who build upon each other’s area of expertise. Instead of classroom teachers dropping students off for arts instruction and using the time for planning, which is a common practice in many schools, we co-plan and co-teach together. We teach each other as well as the students, so the

benefits of this collaboration are long-lasting.”

The Riviera Beach in Maryland team achieved a high level of collaboration by adjusting the schedule, relieving arts teachers of routines such as lunch duty and hall monitoring, and by using some substitute teachers. The time arts specialists spend with classroom teachers has embedded strong, transdisciplinary threads throughout the curriculum, instilled an arts-rich vocabulary, and built a collaborative school culture. “It is always in the best interest of students to leverage expertise and decompartmentalize knowledge. We now offer more consistent experiences for students, and they benefit from the closer bond that exists among faculty,” Wojtila explains. Rowing in the same direction is easier said than done. The Riviera Beach team says co-teaching

involves carefully choreographed interactions with shared work.

Every model of collaboration described by a Champion Creatively Alive Children grant-winning school was different, but two common threads appeared in them: taking the time to grow trusting relationships, like planting bamboo seeds, and focusing on well-articulated goals that connect the entire learning community. Effective teams embrace the messiness of merging many contributors’ ideas and holding each other accountable for results. To turn collaboration from an aspiration into a reality, remember the African proverb: *If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.* 🌊

Cheri Serman is the Crayola director of education and vice chair of the Partnership for 21st Century Learning.