Collaboration Relies on Relationships

The successful marriage of administration and staff can bring results

By Lynmara Colón

At one point or another, most of us have tried to assemble a group that can produce the "magic" of collaboration. And in doing so, most have sought out resources to help develop plans, confront the realities of school needs, and employ student data to inform instruction.

I was guilty of this. Armed with information from multiple books, webinars, and conferences, I thought I had everything I needed to support our school's staff in its collaborative efforts. Little did I know that true collaboration can't be built on literature, videos, and books alone. Instead, it relies on the relationships we build with our staff.

Throughout my career as an administrator, I have looked at collaboration as key to students' academic success. We must be intentional about working together; it doesn't do us any good to have classrooms where students achieve 100 percent mastery in a particular subject, and the classroom across the hall scores 45 percent. A book or prepackaged program isn't enough to close the achievement gap.

Three Stages of Support

Like any relationship, collaboration must go through a number of stages in order to have an impact. During my career, the stages have often paralleled that of a romantic relationship.

Dating. Contrary to what most people report, I considered my first year as a principal to be the easiest. I took the time to observe and made minimal changes. The staff tried to impress me, and I tried to impress them. We really didn't know much about each other; I was excited to have the job, and they were excited to have me as a leader. (Remember, I didn't make any changes.)

This stage is important because it allowed me to learn a lot about our teacher leaders, and which ones were contributing to the school. The time I took to listen was key to learning about the school's needs and how I could satisfy them. It also allowed me to make sense of the data involved with instruction.

I sat in on weekly planning meetings and observed the process in place. Teachers would share subject plans and talk about assessments. I made it a point to let them know how grateful I was that they had hired me as their leader, but I didn't let myself get too comfortable. I never even decorated my office.

Engagement. The second year, I was able to analyze my findings and tap into staff strengths. I was more comfortable asking for feedback and reflecting on my own practices. But I noticed that as a school, we had groups—not teams. We talked about our systems and what we could do to improve. We liked each other personally, but we had some disagreements about instruction.

It took time, but we learned that excellence was going to take more than sitting down at the dinner table. Together, we visited other schools to learn about their practices, how they might help us (I called this the "Dr. Phil" stage), and how to implement them.

I sat in on team planning meetings twice a week. Teachers were concerned that the administration was "monitoring" their meetings, but we were determined to prove that our presence represented more than monitoring. Our goal was to provide support for, and take part in, their collaborative efforts. By the end of the year, staff had become comfortable with our participation, and we dropped the need to collect lesson plans.

Marriage. During my third year, I really understood the stages of collaboration in schools. I had "fallen in love" with my staff and saw myself not as the expert, but as someone responsible for creating the conditions necessary for their success. During our collaborative time, I volunteered to buy resources, co-teach, and alter the way we support professional development.

As we might in a marriage, we learned about our strengths and weaknesses, and we used that knowledge to support each other. Reflection and vulnerability were expectations, and it takes time to build trust and reach a stage at which everyone joins in "fighting the good fight" for the kids.

Strong collaboration has an impact on data, relationships, and student achievement, so you must say goodbye to the days of working in isolation. If we expect students to work together, we must be role models of effective collaboration. Is it always easy? No. As Walt Disney once said, "If it was easy, everyone would do it." And it's more fun to do the impossible. **P**

> **Strong collaboration has an impact on data, relationships, and student achievement, so you must say goodbye to the days of working in isolation. If we expect students to work together, we must be role models of effective collaboration.**

Lynmara Colón is director of EL Programs and Services for Prince William County Schools in Virginia.