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## Best Practices/Tom W. Many, Ed.D.

### Building Collective Capacity: A Defining Moment in Schools

ca.pac.i.ty /kə'pæsiti/ - a noun meaning maximum productivity

*"Building capacity is defined as: actions that lead to an increase in the collective power of a group to improve student achievement, especially by raising the bar and closing the gap for all students."* -M. Fullan

*"School improvement is most surely and thoroughly achieved when teachers engage in frequent, continuous and increasingly concrete and precise talk about teaching practice."* -M. Fullan

Engaging in specific actions designed to build capacity is an effective improvement strategy for two reasons. First, building capacity is a reflective process that promotes better teaching by more teachers more of the time. As principals promote the kinds of experiences that increase the collective capacity of a faculty, knowledge about the most effective ways of improving teaching and learning becomes more available and accessible to all teachers on a daily basis. Second, the process of building capacity is a shared experience, thus, the act of collectively and collaboratively building capacity results in greater commitment to student learning by teachers.

The most effective principals understand that conversations about improving teaching and learning are more powerful when they take place within the context of a teacher's own school. It is encouraging to see teachers who know what they are doing; however, it is far more gratifying to see teachers who are able to articulate why they are doing what they are doing. In the most successful schools, teachers not only talk about what they do, they clearly articulate why they do it.

For these teachers the 'why' is something more than intuition, opinion, or a preference based on past practices. They rely on their best professional judgment and choose whether or not to employ a particular instructional strategy based on an understanding of the research coupled with evidence gathered from their own experience. For teachers in schools with high levels of collective capacity, reflecting on their practice is an ongoing, regular and valued part of their daily routine.

One of the most effective ways to build collective capacity is to provide teachers with dedicated and protected time during the regular school day to reflect on their practices. As Fullan observed, "When schools establish professional learning communities, teachers constantly search for new ways of making improvements." The goal of anyone striving to build the collective capacity of their school must be a culture where teachers work together to plan, teach, reflect, and apply new insights to their daily work.



This ‘constant search for new ways’ of improving teaching and learning requires a commitment of time. Unfortunately, the simple idea of providing time for teachers to reflect on their practice is not as common as one might think. The first place principals should look to build capacity is the master schedule. They should ask themselves, “Does our school provide designated and protected time for teacher teams to meet during the regular school day?”

Building the collective capacity of a faculty is also a shared experience but schools are not very good at sharing what works and what does not. On one hand Fullan says, “There is a strong body of evidence that indicates teachers are the preferred source of ideas for other teachers.” He continues, “On the other hand, the evidence is equally strong that opportunities for teachers to interact with one another are limited, and that when good ideas do get initiated by one or more teachers, the support of other teachers is required if the ideas are to go anywhere.”<sup>3</sup>

Fullan’s observation creates a quandary. If we believe that 1) strategies that allow teachers to learn from one another result in higher levels of collective capacity and 2) teachers truly benefit from opportunities to share but 3) are rarely allowed to engage in them, how then are principals and teacher leaders to respond? One answer is to create more formal opportunities for teachers to exchange ideas and build the collective capacity of their school.

*“The power of collective capacity is that it enables ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things.”<sup>4</sup>  
–M. Fullan*

Three proven strategies create formal opportunities to build the collective capacity of schools. All three —audits, sister school exchanges, and learning fairs —are effective strategies for implementing nearly any change, but each is especially powerful when the goal is building the collective capacity of a school.

Audits begin with gathering data about teachers’ perceptions of their practice and the collection of artifacts to support a description of their school’s current reality. Examples of artifacts include such things as lesson plans, common assessments, team meeting minutes, and student work. Sometimes, principals assume that a particular practice is more deeply embedded than it really is; by gathering work products and producing a portfolio of artifacts, a faculty is more aware of the current reality in their school.

The audit concludes when a team of teachers or administrators from another school or district is invited to review the data, examine the artifacts, and ask the faculty a series of probing questions that correspond with what is known to be best practice. The dialogue between peers

around specific problems of practice forces teachers to reflect in ways they may not have considered before.

A sister school exchange is another way principals build capacity. This idea involves teams of teachers who visit each other’s schools to learn more about how other teachers have incorporated effective teaching practices into their daily routines. Participants shared their own successes while “expanding their repertoire of strategies through exposure to practices effective at other school sites.”<sup>5</sup>

During a sister school exchange, teachers readily identify common concerns that are present in their schools. The process of publicly reflecting on their practice builds the collective capacity of the faculty and allows teachers to articulate their best hopes and worst fears while focusing on the next steps to improve their school.

A third strategy for building collective capacity is a learning fair. The focus of a learning fair is on reflecting upon and celebrating what was accomplished during the previous school year. Much like a science fair, each school prepares to report on an important aspect of their work during the previous year. By reflecting on their professional practice through audits, sister school exchanges, and learning fairs, teachers and schools that have made only halting progress can begin to see remarkable results.

*“The skinny is that nothing succeeds like collective capacity.”<sup>6</sup> –M. Fullan*

For many faculties there is a single experience—one defining moment—that produces the necessary clarity and confidence to ensure that all students learn. Building the collective capacity of teachers can be that defining moment in schools seeking to maximize their productivity.

In fact, building the collective capacity of a faculty with activities such as audits, sister school exchanges, and learning fairs is such an effective strategy for improving teaching and learning that it should be recognized as a regular, routine, and required part of every school’s annual improvement process. ■

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#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>M. Fullan, *Education Analyst – Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education*, Winter 2005.

<sup>2</sup>M. Fullan, *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, (2007), page 97.

<sup>3</sup>M. Fullan, *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, (2007), page 75.

<sup>4</sup>M. Fullan, *Leading in a Culture of Change*, (2001), page 101.

<sup>5</sup>N. Myers, *Getting District Results: A Case Study in Implementing PLCs at Work*, (2012), page 95.

<sup>6</sup>M. Fullan, *Motion Leadership*, (2010), page 41.