Chapter 4

GETTING STARTED

TOOL

Where are we?

Teams of teachers in our school meet regularly to learn and work together.

STRONGLY AGREE   AGREE   NOT SURE   DISAGREE   STRONGLY DISAGREE

Some teachers in our school meet regularly to learn and work together.

STRONGLY AGREE   AGREE   NOT SURE   DISAGREE   STRONGLY DISAGREE

Teachers tend to work independently in our school.

STRONGLY AGREE   AGREE   NOT SURE   DISAGREE   STRONGLY DISAGREE

All teachers in our school are members of collaborative professional learning teams.

STRONGLY AGREE   AGREE   NOT SURE   DISAGREE   STRONGLY DISAGREE

In the last several years, researchers have examined the links among instruction, teacher professional development, school leadership, and student learning. Most educators understand that, when teachers have deep content knowledge, design and deliver data-driven instruction targeting student content standards, and work in a supportive, collaborative, and productive environment, students will be successful.

Working collaboratively to construct joint work, solve common problems, plan instruction, and design and score common assessments are some examples of how teachers engage in collaborative professional learning and acquire the required 100 hours of professional development. In collaborative professional learning, teachers use their routine work as opportunities for learning and improving their practice and student learning. In this way, professional development is naturally integrated into their daily work and connected to what they are teaching.

While most agree that collaborative learning time for teachers is valuable, many schools and districts are still unwilling to adjust their current professional development practices to add more time for collaboration among teachers. The many reasons for this hesitation range from finding time to trusting teachers to use the time wisely. Whatever the reasons for not launching collaborative professional learning have been in the past, this tool kit addresses them. It is designed to assist school and district staff to transform typical professional development into collaborative learning centered around content, assessment, content-specific pedagogy, and student learning.
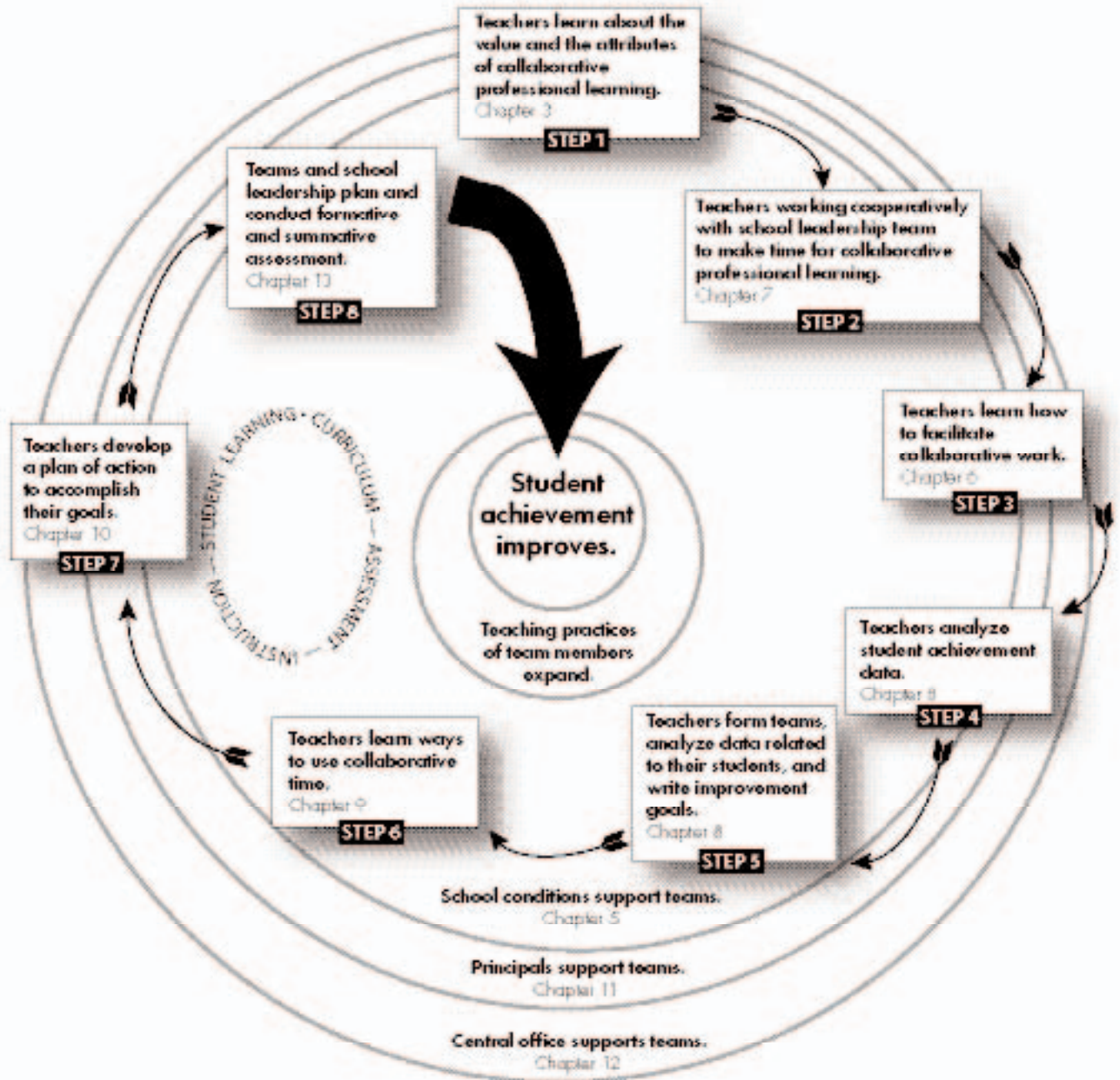
The major question facing those who have not yet added collaboration into their professional development programs is where to begin. For those who have already launched some collaboration, the question is how to improve team's effectiveness. Jody Westbrook and Shirley Hord say it best, "Creating a professional learning community in a school is no easy task. . . . Any school change requires abundant time, energy, and resourcefulness, along with large quantities of school leadership" (Westbrook & Hord, 2000, p. 2). A deceptively simple process when looking from the outside in, collaborative professional learning requires a deep infrastructure that creates the necessary conditions for learning to be professionally rewarding for teachers and impact students.

The model that follows offers a theory of change for collaborative professional learning. It explains how teacher learning impacts student learning when teachers are working and learning with their colleagues. "A program's theory of change delineates the underlying assumptions upon which the program is based. It includes not only the components of a program and also incorporates an explanation of how change is expected to occur.

A program's theory of change can be based on existing research, current practice, or the program developer's implicit theories of action" (Killion, 2002, p. 55). The theory of change for collaborative professional learning in Figure 4.1 offers a road map for the process of initiating, implementing, evaluating, and sustaining collaborative professional learning.

Figure 4.1

Collaborative professional learning: Theory of change

Teachers learn about the value and the attributes of collaborative professional learning.
Chapter 3
STEP 1

Teams and school leadership plan and conduct formative and summative assessment.
Chapter 13
STEP 8

Teachers working cooperatively with school leadership team to make time for collaborative professional learning.
Chapter 7
STEP 2

Teachers learn how to facilitate collaborative work.
Chapter 6
STEP 3

Teachers develop a plan of action to accomplish their goals.
Chapter 10
STEP 7

INSTRUCTION — STUDENT LEARNING — CURRICULUM — ASSESSMENT

Student achievement improves.

Teaching practices of team members expand.

Teachers analyze student achievement data.
Chapter 8
STEP 4

Teachers learn ways to use collaborative time.
Chapter 9
STEP 6

Teachers form teams, analyze data related to their students, and write improvement goals.
Chapter 8
STEP 5

School conditions support teams.
Chapter 5

Principals support teams.
Chapter 11

Central office supports teams.
Chapter 12

This theory of change is based on several assumptions:

- When teachers learn within a community of learners, their learning is richer and more meaningful.
- Teachers who learn within a community of learners are more likely to find value in their learning and to apply what they learn in their classrooms.
- Teachers' content knowledge impacts their ability to design instruction to meet rigorous core curriculum content standards.
- Teachers use data about student learning to design and deliver instruction to students with varied abilities.
- School leaders are an integral part of both teacher and student success.

Teachers' access to high-quality, job-embedded professional development that includes ample time for collaboration creates a learning culture within the school that promotes both teacher and student learning.

The theory of change for collaborative professional learning is depicted in Figure 4.1.

- Steps 1-3 are the preparatory steps.
- Steps 4-6 are the collaborative professional learning process. Once teams have gained some foundational knowledge, they can repeat steps 7-13.
- Steps 7-8 are the heart of the collaborative learning process and describe the cycle of learning for each team.

The model suggests that collaborative work focused on student learning is cyclical. In other words, teachers identify a focused, SMART goal (S=Specific, M=Measurable, A=Attainable, R=Results-driven, T=Timebound), teach, assess students' achievement of the goal, and use data from the assessment to identify the next goals. This cycle may be repeated in various lengths of time ranging from monthly to annually depending on the amount of time teams meet. For teams who meet daily, the cycle of learning might be monthly; for a team that meets only weekly, the cycle might be by semester. Other teams may decide to establish a plan for the entire school year even if they meet daily or weekly. However, shorter cycles allow for more targeted work and have the potential to impact learning

Tool 4.1

more directly.

For schools that have not yet initiated collaborative professional learning, the cycle identifies some of the foundations to consider before starting. For the many schools that have initiated some form of collaborative professional learning, the theory of change offers guidance about where to improve their effectiveness. They might want to consider if they have created time for teachers to meet in collaborative teams and provided adequate opportunities for teachers to learn what a collaborative professional learning team is, how it can add value to teachers' lives, or how to facilitate learning teams or use their time. Even teams that have been meeting together for some time can benefit from examining the theory of change and comparing it to their own work.

The theory of change for collaborative professional learning offers a process map for initiating, improving, or monitoring a school's collaborative professional learning process. Checking it frequently helps teams know if they are on track for producing the results they want.

Tool 4.1 is by New Jersey principal Patricia Wright and teacher Beth Warren. Together, Wright and Warren reflect back on their efforts to create collaborative learning within their school and offer their individual perspective. This tool demonstrates how the theory of change looks in action within a New Jersey school.

References

Killion, J. (2002). *Assessing impact: Evaluating staff development.* Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.

Westbrook, J. & Hord, S. (2000). *Introduction.* In Chapman, R., Hinson, R., Hipp, K., Jacoby, C., Huffman, J., Pankake, A., Sattes, B., Thomas, J., & Westbrook, J. *Multiple mirrors: Reflections on the creation of professional learning communities.* Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.

TOOL 4.1

A community of learners. One school's journey — two viewpoints

A story told by
Patricia Wright, former principal, now superintendent
   of Spring Lake (N.J.) Public Schools
Beth Warren, former teacher, now supervisor of language arts
   in East Brunswick (N.J.) Public Schools

The following is the story of one school's transformation into a professional learning community. It details the steps of the process. The first voice is that of the leader who engaged the staff in a shared vision for high levels of achievement for all of our students. The second voice describes the teacher's reaction to the changes. It reveals that building a learning community is a process that involves creating a school culture built on mutual respect, collegiality, collaboration, celebration, shared leadership and shared responsibility.

Wright: Years of experience as a teacher had taught me the impact, both positive and negative, that leadership has on a school community. As I assumed my first principalship, I knew I wanted to establish a safe, respectful and productive learning environment for all students and staff. My goal was to be an instructional leader who created an ongoing dialogue about learning. I was thrilled when I saw that the mission statement of my new school claimed, "We are a community of learners."

Warren: The staff had been on one big roller coaster ride. After several principals, each with a different style and philosophy, the staff was scattered in their thinking and their practice. Although we were a group of talented professionals, we were all working in different directions. There was an overall feeling of negativity and a lack of common goals.

Wright: I spent the first few months in my new position listening and observing. I quickly realized that not only were the teachers not talking about teaching and learning, some were not talking to each other at all! A staff and student survey revealed that student discipline was an area of concern. I decided to use this area to develop our first common school goal. The collective dialogue began. A group of interested teachers volunteered to be our Character Education Core Team. Discussions at faculty meetings led to the staff's conclusion that any character education efforts had to be directly tied to the school's discipline policy. Another collaborative team was born — one that took on the job of revising the existing discipline policy. Still another committee was formed to develop schoolwide activities to support our initiative. We planned a series of lessons that taught students the importance of respect and the steps of conflict resolution. We also let students know that bullying would not be tolerated. The number one school rule became respect for everyone in the school community. The staff modeled that rule and the core program lessons of anti-bullying and conflict resolution daily.

Warren: Having a common purpose gave us the opportunity to begin to work together. I was excited. There was a cautious feeling of optimism. Not only were we seeing a difference in student behavior, but we also began to shift our attitudes as we modeled respectful behavior and conflict resolution strategies. Communication improved and a dialogue focused on school improvement was begun.

Wright: As principal, I took part in every committee. My character education core team and I attended conflict resolution training and we used faculty meeting time to train the rest of the staff. Students were taught these skills so they could solve problems peacefully. The same skills were used by the adults as they worked side-by-side on this initiative. Within a few short months, teachers saw an improvement in the school climate. This was due not only to the students' response to our efforts, but also to a renewed sense of collaboration and mutual respect among the staff. We had tackled a problem together and we had met success.

Warren: Although I was receptive to the development of new committees, I was skeptical that they would make a significant impact. Throughout the years,

I had served on numerous groups charged by the leader with the responsibility for some school change. Rarely did the leader take part in the actual committee work. I was impressed with the new principal's full participation in committee discussions. This led to decisions that actually had an impact on the daily life of the school. For example, her participation in our character education initiative allowed her to effectively reinforce those lessons when dealing with discipline in the office. What a novel idea! Everyone was on the same page! I was eager to participate because I knew my ideas were valued. As trust built, more teachers took responsibility for their group's work by voicing concerns and sharing ideas. I could see everyone finally taking ownership for our school's improvement.

Wright: The dialogue started, the climate improved and it was time to focus on learning. I initiated a professional book club. Several teachers from various grade levels and disciplines eagerly joined the breakfast group as we read our first selection, Mosaic of Thought, by Ellin Keene. The teachers would leave a session and try some of the ideas in their classrooms, come back and share both successes and failures. As the teachers engaged, they learned more about each other personally and professionally. In the process they were building trust and the school culture was changing from one of isolation to one of collaboration. As they reflected on research and practice, the group defined a problem. We currently did not approach the teaching of reading comprehension consistently across grade levels and contents. The group then worked on a solution. They developed a set of active reading strategies and shared them at a faculty meeting. Posters of the strategies were made for every classroom. Ultimately, the strategies became part of the district-wide literacy curriculum and our teachers led summer workshops to share their ideas with others across the district.

Warren: My colleagues and I were excited. We realized that we had the power to affect change by working collaboratively. I was taking ideas directly from our book club sessions and immediately applying the strategies in my classroom. Book club members were impressed with each other's abilities and we realized we could learn more from each other that we could from any one-day workshop. The sharing of craft knowledge fostered an excitement for professional learning. Other teachers from the district, as well as other school com-

munities visited our classrooms extending our learning community outside our own school's walls.

Wright: Together, the staff and I identified other areas of need. School goals were collectively developed and Professional Improvement Plans were written. Teachers chose to work in focus groups on areas of interest. These groups met regularly to read and reflect on current research. Classrooms became laboratories as teachers implemented new ideas and provided feedback on results. Teachers examined student work and used data to drive instruction. The groups had the opportunity to share successful strategies with the entire staff at faculty meetings. The following are some of the groups that were formed over the past six years: meeting the needs of all learners, narrative writing, technology, parent communication, study and organizational skills, reading and writing across the curriculum. The work of these groups has had a significant impact on student achievement.

Warren: The school was alive with discussion that focused on instruction. In the halls, the faculty room and even the parking lot, I often heard, "Did you try…" or "You should see what my students did!" or "Can I come in and see that lesson?" The principal was part of the dialogue. She visited my classroom to see the impact that the focus group discussions were having on student learning. She encouraged my colleagues and me by her consistent involvement whether it meant finding a book that supported a project, sharing success stories or arranging for class coverage so we could observe in each others' classrooms. Classroom doors were wide open and teacher isolation was a thing of the past. Observations took on a new life because the principal could relate the content of my lesson directly to my professional development experiences and talk with me about my changing practice.

Wright: I was not only the leader but the lead learner. In the beginning, I attended every focus group meeting. As more groups developed and teachers became more confident in their collaboration skills, they took on leadership roles as facilitators and recorders. They scheduled their own meetings, sent e-mail updates to members and ensured that the rest of the staff was kept up-to-date on their work.

Warren: My professional development experiences provided me with knowledge, tools and strategies that impacted student learning. Slowly, I also developed a new skills set. I realized the power of active listening, conflict resolution, constructivist facilitation and organizational skills. Without even realizing it, I was honing my ability to lead. I was empowered by the potential a professional learning community had to change teaching and learning, school climate and myself.

Wright: A true learning community adopts the notion that failure for students is not an option. Our Intervention and Referral Services team increased its effectiveness by devising a meeting protocol and a method for examining student work. We focused on developing sound intervention plans. We communicated with members of all the focus groups in order to develop and share the most effective strategies for helping at risk learners. Instead of talking about why a student was experiencing difficulty, the focus was now on how we would ensure his or her success.

Warren: I participated in Intervention and Referral Services Team meetings throughout my career either as a teacher who had referred a student, or as a member of the I&RS team. Meetings became more meaningful. There was a richer dialogue about possible interventions and accommodations that would increase each student's chance of success. The work of the focus groups produced a broader repertoire of behavioral and instructional strategies from which to choose.

Wright: Our school won several awards including a New Jersey Best Practice and a New Jersey Star School Award. Everyone in the school community took pride in these accomplishments because along the way we celebrated everyday — a note of congratulations in the school bulletin, a word of praise to a colleague, shared stories of student successes. We became a community of learners that took collective responsibility for failures and achievements.

Warren: I was excited to see my colleagues meet with success. There was a renewed pride in our school. The awards were just the public confirmation of the success of our collaborative work.

Wright: This will be my last year as principal of this school. Looking back, I realize how much I have grown as a leader. At a recent faculty meeting, the staff

reflected on our accomplishments. All agreed that their active participation in our professional learning community played a key role in our success. I explained that many things in the school had changed, but most importantly they had changed. The ability to continue the journey belonged to them.

Warren: I have applied what I have learned to my new role as a district supervisor. Facilitating learning communities is a priority for me because it is a promising practice that nurtures professional growth and enhances student achievement. I currently bring grade-level teachers together and implement the model of collaboration that I learned from my principal. I can now use my knowledge to help other teachers to become leaders who affect change in their school communities.

Wright: As a new principal enters the building, he or she will hear teachers talking and I am sure they will continue to talk about what matters most — learning! They have truly become a community of learners who have created their own cycle of continuous school improvement.