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Schools need collaboration

By Janet Angelis
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Despite increasing evidence that collaboration is one of the keys to a school's success in improving student performance and closing achievement gaps, policymakers at national and state levels, including New York, are moving toward teacher evaluation systems that attempt to attribute student progress to the efforts of individual teachers.

Such policies, rooted in a competitive model, miss the point of what leaders of successful organizations know about collaboration: "If everyone is moving forward together, then success takes care of itself" (Henry Ford). Although in the popular imagination competition among individuals may be seen as the path to success, competition within an organization is not the route to effectiveness.

Years of research into practices that distinguish schools that close achievement gaps provide

ample evidence that the problems contributing to low student performance are less about what teachers and administrators do individually and more about what they do together. Included in this research is a series of five studies across all grade levels, geographic areas and socioeconomic levels in New York that has sought to identify the characteristics that distinguish higher-performing from average-performing schools.

This research has looked particularly at schools that serve large numbers of economically disadvantaged students. In every study, collaboration has been a key ingredient in the higher-performing schools' success.

Among the important things educators in higher-performing schools collaborate about is analyzing performance data from individual classrooms as well as across the school. In schools with higher than average student achievement, Ford's assertion of the importance of working together in pursuit of a shared goal holds true.

Teachers look at results together, sharing successes and problems with each other and administrators as they try to find what will work for a particular student or class.

They seek out colleagues for advice about what has worked for them and visit each other's classrooms to watch or critique a lesson.

They analyze their state assessment data plus district, school, department and individual teacher assessments, as well as surveys of parents and students, to help them set goals, monitor progress and change practices or reallocate resources when the data show lack of adequate

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progress toward meeting those goals.

Such practices are possible only when groups of individuals work together in a climate of trust and shared responsibility. Their students' success is the result of -- and should be credited to -- the efforts of a collective of individuals rather than any one.

Educators wishing to improve performance under the new teacher evaluation policies, then, face the challenge of reconciling new mandates that focus on individual practice and favor competition with collaborative practices that have been shown to be more effective.

Such collaborative practices include teachers across subjects jointly developing interdisciplinary projects and units that capture students' interest and push them to think at higher levels.

Or teachers in every subject reinforcing language acquisition and learning for students learning English as a second language or lacking background vocabulary knowledge.

Or in each subject area, teachers working together to align the curriculum so that those at every grade level are preparing their students for the grade to follow.

Or across subject areas and grades, teachers striving for consistency and coherence, because a coherent program throughout a school has a bigger and more enduring impact on improved student performance than the efforts of individual teachers.

Policies that support -- or at least do not interfere with -- building school cultures that encourage teachers and administrators to work together to prepare every student to succeed have been shown to work.

Basing teacher evaluation systems on practices that have been found not to work in schools runs counter to the evidence. Just as in athletics, competition between schools might improve team performance, but when teams don't work together, they are unlikely to succeed.

Janet Angelis is the director of the Know Your Schools--for NY Kids project in the University at Albany School of Education. The project is conducting the studies of higher-performing vs. average-performing schools (<http://www.albany.edu/aire/kids>).

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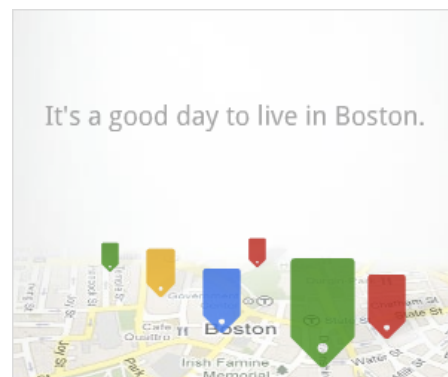
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