

## Challenge Two: Instructional Teamwork

### INSTRUCTIONAL TEAMWORK

In July 2013, the U.S. Department of Education and its partners convened administrators from state education agencies and school districts and leaders from state and local teacher union affiliates to consider and identify possible solutions to the following questions:

- *What can labor and management do together to promote the formation of successful instructional teams and cultivate their continuous improvement?*
- *What are effective ways to compose instructional teams and cultivate their continuous improvement?*
- *What systems, structures and supports need to be in place, including time, and what impediments and restrictions need to be removed, in order to support their success as a learning team?*

Rather than identifying and discussing multiple solutions to the challenges presented by the questions, the group honed in on the design elements and functions of effective instructional teams and the conditions necessary for their success. Team members agreed that if structured and then launched properly, instructional teams can transform teaching and learning and ensure the effective implementation of new standards at whatever level the teams operate: across a specific grade level, a school or an entire school district. This focus on design elements, functions and the transformation of teaching and learning led the team to identify a single solution to the instructional teamwork challenge.

**SOLUTION:** At grade, school and/or district levels, establish instructional teams focused on setting and reaching goals for instructional practices that are necessary for successful implementation of college- and career-ready standards.

The solutions group determined that schools and districts cannot afford to take the “same old” approach to instructional teamwork. Rather, union and district leaders should build and launch them in environments that support their success. As one participant said, “Empowering these teams to make decisions won’t be enough. Management needs to say ‘we are listening to you and we are going to help you make this happen.’”

This brief details how the solutions group proposes that unions and districts make instructional leadership teams happen through design, construction and launch phases. It also identifies the potential outcomes for successful implementation and addresses the barriers district-union partners will likely face as they implement instructional teams.

### Designing, Building and Launching an Effective Instructional Team

The group identified five activities that define effective instructional teams as districts and unions design, construct and launch them.

Figure 1 identifies the five key activities of an instructional team, as suggested by the solutions group.

Figure 1



## Clearly Defining Purpose

The solutions group suggested that the union and the school district jointly define the purpose of the instructional team. As one participant said, “The district and union – labor-management – should come together and determine what the ‘what’ is and ‘why’ we are doing it. Let’s clarify that as a collective – around what and the why – and leave the ‘how’ up to the instructional teams.” Added another, “I think having consensus from a district, from a union, from an administration, and from a labor perspective around the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ would be an instrumental part of the solution.” The team agreed that giving the instructional teams dominion over **how** to implement the purpose provides them the flexibility to respond to the unique instructional needs of the teachers and administrators they serve.

As a first step, the solutions group agreed that union and district leaders must meet and begin to identify the purpose and function (the whats and whys) of the instructional team(s) they will launch. This initial work session, suggested the group, should be driven by grade-, school- or district-level data, depending on the scope of the instructional team design. Union and school districts can use student data to determine the purpose and function of the instructional team.

Additionally, the solutions group suggested that after a review of data some districts and partner unions

might find it necessary to launch an aligned grouping of instructional teams focused on a small number of schools, specific grade levels across school districts or all district schools. If districts and unions choose this path, suggested the solutions group, then union and district leaders should ensure that they are coordinating efforts across the teams to maximize efforts and produce desired outcomes for students.

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- *Member of the solutions group*

## Identifying Team Membership

The purpose and function of the instructional team should inform union and district selection of appropriate instructional team members, the solution team agreed.

To that end, the solutions group suggested several guiding principles for appointing the team. First, the group should consist of both administrators and teachers to ensure representative points of view. Second, the group should include teachers who are both inside and outside of English Language Arts and mathematics – two content areas that receive significant attention now because of the College- and Career-Ready (CCR) standards. A diverse slate of content area teachers will ensure important cross-disciplinary knowledge and counteract the perception that the CCR standards impacts only English Language Arts and mathematics teachers. Finally, the instructional team should include the right people. As one group member put it, “Human dynamics matter here.” Those who are appointed should have a passion to participate in the instructional team, understand the team’s broader impact on teaching

and learning, and be eager to use data to make instructional decisions.

Several solutions group members discussed specific approaches employed by their schools to select and appoint instructional team members, one of which includes holding elections as a mandate of the collective bargaining agreement. In this model, teachers use criteria to nominate peers who then run in an election. The nomination process was described as ensuring that relevant criteria were met, while the election process addressed the “human dynamics” and representative nature of the role. Victorious nominees become members of the instructional team. Group members suggested that administrators interested in serving on district-level teams be nominated and then voted on by colleagues using a similar process. However, not all parties agreed that membership and other elements of the instructional teams should have to be collectively bargained. As one participant wrote in an email following the convening, “There are advantages and disadvantages to [inserting language into collective bargaining agreements]...[I]n my experience not everything needs to go there and more importantly, some discernment is necessary to ensure bargaining agreements do not become rife with extraneous issues that erode trust.”

While the group agreed that construction of the instructional team should follow function, it decided that school-level instructional teams should by default include a building-level administrator. Across all levels of focus, it further concluded, the number of positions available on the instructional team should be commensurate with the size of the school and number of staff members in the school.

## Growing and Learning as a Team

The solutions group agreed that highly effective instructional teams must have dedicated time to grow and learn together. This dedicated time can take many forms, from team building exercises to strategy

sessions and deep-dive data discussions. The solutions group noted the possibility that many teachers new to the instructional team might not know each other. For the instructional team to thrive, instructional team members must begin to develop trust quickly through targeted exercises and actions.

The solutions group identified four possible ways to increase the amount of time the instructional team spends together. One member suggested simply repurposing time currently used. He noted, “Not all of our professional development time is about new instruction. Some could be used for team building.” Another group member suggested that instructional teams maximize the use of “peripheral freedoms” that many collective bargaining agreements grant schools. In response to these freedoms, schools can redefine how they use prep and after school time. One member suggested that the instructional teams can benefit from a redistribution of small amounts of time that schools do not use effectively. As he put it, “Look at what already exists before adding time to the work week. What can we do with the time we already have set aside to use it more wisely?” Ending on what some team members believed to be a bolder note, one member suggested that unions and districts rethink how they meet the need for teacher time with students and teacher time with other teachers. In this case, the team considered the notion that schools could develop class schedules or student contact time in coordination with instructional team time, not the other way around, to ensure that team time is not an afterthought. Ultimately, the group concluded that the instructional team should be empowered to make decisions about how schools organize time at the school level.

## Ensuring Accountability for Results

The fourth element of the effective design, construction and launch of instructional teams prioritizes accountability for results and regular

reflection on practice. The group suggested that accountability is a shared responsibility and “a shared destiny” of all members of the instructional team. The group called special attention to the principal, who is typically the person held most responsible for the success or failure of a school, an initiative such as the rollout of CCR standards, or for an instructional team. The group recognized the difficulty of the principal’s position, which puts him or her under tremendous pressure to reach outcomes or else lose his or her job. Without ensuring that all team members share in the responsibility for and consequences of succeeding or failing, the sense of urgency and commitment might feel uneven. Group members further posited that in certain cases the principal might need cover for standing behind his or her instructional team and offering it full support. The group asserted that the principal should have some leeway to say, “This is a decision made by my instructional team and I stand behind it.” The solutions group suggested that this validation and support for the administrator and for the team might be necessary to ensure the long-term viability of the instructional team.

## Engaging in a Process for Continuous Improvement

As a fifth and final element, the group recommended that instructional teams at all levels engage in a process for continuous improvement that builds upon the activities already described here. This process is intended to ensure that the team is effectively tailoring its work to the educator and student needs in the school or district---and seeing results. The cycle of review proposed included three parts: 1) *Use data to set goals* (furthering the team’s clarity of purpose); 2) *learn and grow together* (through joint work together that impacts structures like professional development, student time, etc.); and 3) *employ accountability and reflect on results* (preparing the team to re-visit the team purpose, composition and action plan as

needed). See Figure 2. The group emphasized that it’s essential that even where multiple teams are created, there is an alignment of purpose from the school-level instructional team all the way to up to the district leadership. They suggested the continuous improvement process as one mechanism for ensuring that’s the case. While each team’s purpose (“the what and the why” discussed earlier) may be developed in a top-down fashion in some cases and a bottom-up manner in others, everyone should be using the continuous improvement process to answer “how” to accomplish the agreed upon “what and why.”

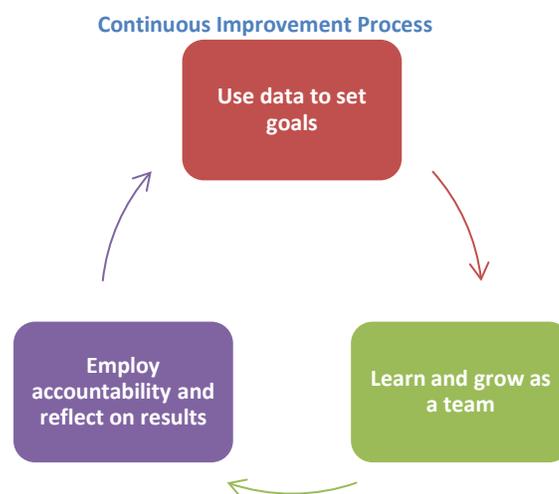


Figure 2

## Cultivating Conditions for Success

To engage in these five key activities successfully in the long run, noted the solutions group, effective instructional teams will require the cultivation of specific conditions in their school and district. To that end, the group emphasized that unions and school districts must build instructional teams on a foundation of a vibrant and healthy school culture, where collaboration between labor and management is the default operating mode.

Trust between teachers and administrators is the bedrock of a healthy school culture, according to the

solutions group. Education leadership must trust teachers and teachers must trust education leadership and each other. This takes on greater significance as the parties launch the instructional team.

## What Does Success Look Like?

Those holding instructional teams accountable should use measures of both process and outcomes to evaluate success, solution group members agreed. On the process side, this means assessing how successfully the parties designed, built and launched their instructional teams. Team members suggested that process indicators of success might include a demonstration of shared purpose among members and examples of teamwork.

When it comes to outcome-based measures of success, the application of the three-part continuous improvement cycle suggested by the team can act as a tool for evaluation. Ultimately, the cycle requires teams to gather feedback and engage in continuous improvement as they determine whether they have met their goals.

The ultimate outcome-based measure of success, solution group members determined, is the instructional team's impact on student learning. Districts and teams can measure this success through the use of multiple qualitative and quantitative measures, including daily learning assessments and typical standardized tests.

## What Are Possible Barriers to Implementation?

In discussing instructional teams, the solutions group identified three potential barriers to guard against:

1. **Failure to commit to the right mix of educators on the team.** The team must reach beyond mathematics and English Language Arts teachers. Rather, it must have cross-disciplinary

representation to ensure successful school-wide implementation of CCR standards.

2. **A lack of trust among team members.** One team member suggested that instructional teams will bring together people “who don't even know each other and you're going to ask them to come together to do some of this heavy work?” In continuing his remarks, he offered a solution, “I think there has to be some space and some time in creating what some people think of as touchy-feely, hokey, trust stuff – those things have to get done.” Another member added, “There's a really important tension in the trust building process. You can't just start by building trust – you have to build trust through the work.”
3. **The possibility that teams will not attract participants committed to implementation of CCR standards.** Sometimes these types of grade-, school- or district-level efforts attract those who are looking for a forum to complain or participants more interested in compliance than a commitment to achieving results. This can pose a barrier. Unions and districts should develop selection criteria and strategies to distinguish the dedicated from the undedicated, the committed from the compliant.

## Reflections from the Convening Co-sponsors

Helping students meet the expectations of CCR standards will take team work; we will not be able to rely on the individual effort of a few great teachers. Educators must take collective ownership for student learning; structures of shared decision-making and open-door practice must provide educators with the collaborative autonomy to do what is best for each student; and the profession must take upon itself the responsibility for ensuring that high standards of

practice are met. In this professional culture, teachers and principals together make the primary decisions about educator selection, assignment, evaluation, dismissal, and career advancement—with student learning at the center of all such decisions. And all stakeholders—parents, teachers, school boards, superintendents and administrators, business leaders, and community members—must take responsibility for the academic and social well-being of the students in our charge and engage in the strong, consistent, and sustained collaboration critical to making improvement possible.

### ***A Word about This Brief***

In late July 2013, as an extension to its 2011 and 2012 convenings to maximize labor-management collaboration, the U.S. Department of Education, in partnership with numerous national organizations, hosted state and local education leaders at GE Foundation’s *Summer Conference for Educators*. Specifically, convening organizers asked participants to consider how structures and systems of collaborative labor relations—including collective bargaining and other agreements, joint committees and structures, and policies and practices—could be harnessed to better support teachers and leaders in implementing college- and career-ready standards. Convening organizers grouped participants in one of five teams each charged to consider one of five distinct CCR standards implementation challenges: *Professional Development, Instructional Teamwork, Access to Quality Instruction in High-Need Schools, Student Time* and *Curricular and Instructional Materials*.

This brief represents the best thinking of the *Instructional Teamwork* solutions group, which investigated the following questions:

- What can labor and management do together to promote the formation of successful instructional teams and cultivate their continuous improvement?
- What are effective ways to compose instructional teams and cultivate their continuous improvement?
- What systems, structures and supports need to be in place, including time, and what impediments and restrictions need to be removed, in order to support their success as a learning team?