

TEAM LEARNING

Teachers who learn together improve together

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Go in the classroom. Close the door. Teach by yourself. Chat briefly with other teachers at the copying machine, in the parking lot after school, or while grading papers in the teachers' lounge during a 30-minute lunch break. Go home after school, grade students' work, and plan the next day's lessons — by yourself. Repeat the same routine the next day, pausing once every two weeks for a staff meeting that is mostly administrivia.

Simplistic? Yes. But, painfully close to the truth. In the traditional life of a teacher, where is the time for talking with other teachers about substantive issues or about challenges with various students? Where is the time to work with colleagues to prepare lessons or talk about what students learned as a result of those lessons?

Ensuring time for team learning is one of Peter Senge's five components of a learning organization. In *The Fifth Discipline*, he writes that "team learning is vital because teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations. This is where 'the rubber meets the road'; unless teams can learn, the organization cannot learn. "When teams are truly learning, not only are they producing extraordinary results, but the individual members are growing more rapidly than could have occurred otherwise," Senge writes.

One of the critical attributes of schools that support such learning is that teachers meet in teams multiple times each week during the school day to learn ways to respond to challenging issues, said Dennis Sparks, executive director of the National Staff Development Council. This is not after-school work nor hit-or-miss, but regular, predictable time together, he said.

Another critical attribute is that all teachers feel responsible for the learning of all students, whether those students are in their classrooms or the classrooms of other teachers. "There is no 'my kids,' or 'your kids.' It's 'our kids' for all teachers, all the time," he said.

Milken schools

When the Milken Family Foundation approached a handful of Arizona schools about joining an initiative aimed at improving student learning, one component virtually sold the program: professional development built into the school day.

"There's no question that having a professional growth block every day was one of the most attractive pieces they offered," said Karolee Hess, principal at Camelview Elementary School in the Madison School District in Phoenix.

Camelview is one of five Arizona schools participating in Milken's [Teacher Advancement Program](#) (TAP). TAP's aim is to improve student performance by improving teaching quality. Milken has given each school guidance plus \$100,000 to support new ideas that could not be funded by their districts.

One of TAP's guiding principles is ensuring ongoing, school-based professional learning, including daily planning and collaborative time, that is tied to desired outcomes identified by each school. Even the language the schools use signals a different expectation: Milken schools talk about "professional growth blocks," and not "team meeting times."

Closely related to that is the creation of several levels of teachers: "associate" teachers who primarily teach; "mentor" teachers who mentor associate and other mentor teachers and also facilitate professional development meetings; and "master" teachers who function as on-site staff developers guiding professional growth blocks. Camelview has three master teachers, 7 mentor teachers, and 16 associate teachers.

Each school's professional development plan is determined by school goals based on student learning needs and individual teacher growth plans.

"Just giving them the time isn't going to do it. They need the time along with the individual growth plans along with the master teachers. It all has to work together," said Mikii Bendotti, executive director of the Arizona TAP.

Each TAP school decided independently how to best use its professional growth time. At Killip Elementary School in Flagstaff, for example, teachers chose a schedule in which each of its 55 teachers teaches four days a week with the fifth day devoted to professional learning. On the professional development day, teachers meet by grade level for part of the day, in "cluster" meetings (where two or more grades meet together), and do independent work or perhaps one-on-one work with a master teacher.

Camelview opted to provide teachers with a 90-minute professional development block four days a week. The first hour of that block is for grade-level teams; the final 30 minutes is for individual planning.

During the professional growth block, Camelview's 520 students participate in specials including social studies and science. Camelview, which is a K-2 school, used some of its Milken money to hire one additional teacher who teaches only science and social studies. That enables other classroom teachers to focus on reading, writing, and mathematics.

Ensuring that students would continue learning while their teachers learned was essential, Hess said. "You have to keep that integrity. You can't just send kids out to play," she said.

Camelview teachers used their professional growth time to compare the Arizona standards to the district curriculum. Teachers identified overlaps between the two sets of standards and now routinely identify which standards are addressed in each lesson.

In the process of learning more about the state standards, however, teachers also decided their report card was inadequate. Now, they are re-designing the report card to reflect a child's progress towards reaching various state standards.

Camelview's professional growth block also has enabled teachers to solve a conflict between their school's culture and state expectations. Arizona recently passed legislation that requires schools to administer a standardized exam to 1st graders. The 1st grade team studied how to prepare students for such testing without interrupting their regular instruction. Teachers used their learning time to read about potential strategies and to discuss options. They eventually decided to treat test-taking skills as another genre in literacy and began looking at their classroom and homework assignments to find ways to consistently incorporate test-taking skills without distracting from the lesson's content.

"We did not want the test to consume what we're doing. But it's not fair to the children if we don't teach them something about taking the test," Hess said.

Camelview teachers regularly examine student work. Because literacy is a focus in the school, they spend each Friday looking at what the school calls "draft books," similar to writing journals. "By reading these draft books together, teachers can identify where each teacher needs to go next with a child," Hess said.

During one week, a master teacher introduced an article about children's developmental readiness for geometry. After teachers read the article, they discussed indicators of readiness in student work. Then, teachers brought in student work and put those ideas to work.

After less than a year with the professional growth block, Hess says the experience has been extraordinary.

"The growth that has taken place in their theories and their understanding of teaching and learning is phenomenal.

"Other professions have had time during their work day to go off and learn. In education, we have not had that. When you do have that, it creates a culture, an attitude that this is a profession. It's more powerful," Hess said.