



# The importance of leadership to teacher collaboration, collective efficacy and achievement

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Why is instructional leadership important? The answer is addressed in a recent publication co-authored by Drs. Roger and Yvonne Goddard and their colleagues. Goddard, Goddard, Kim and Miller (2015) found that when school leaders supported teachers' collective work on instruction and professional development, teachers spent more time collaborating with a focus on instructional improvement. In turn, teacher collaboration for instructional improvement led to increased levels of collective efficacy and gains in student achievement. Driving all of this was the quality of principals' instructional leadership.

In theory, when teachers collaborate and focus their collective work on instruction they have more opportunities for mastery and vicarious learning experiences that, according to Bandura, positively affect their belief that they have what it takes to educate all students (collective efficacy). The more efficacious teachers are, the more effort, creativity and resiliency they demonstrate in teaching and the better their students' achievement appears in government assessments of learning. In sum, the effects of instructional leadership snowball in such a way that leadership supports collaboration, resulting in more efficacious teachers, thus leading to improved student outcomes. Importantly, leaders do not affect student outcomes directly. Instead, they impact student achievement indirectly via the instructional support they provide their teachers.

## Instructional Leadership

A vast literature supports various aspects of instructional leadership. Instructional leaders are familiar with classroom instruction in their schools; set high standards for teaching and learning; seek teacher input about and are knowledgeable about curriculum, instruction and assessment in their schools; support teachers' collaborative work; and are people with whom teachers feel comfortable discussing instruction. Via instructional and collaborative support for teachers, principals create environments in which teachers are more efficacious and students learn. In the Goddard et al. study, student learning was positively and significantly impacted by these factors even after accounting for the influence of prior achievement as well as important student and school demographics such as poverty.

## Collaboration

The importance of instructional leadership to teachers' collaborative work was reinforced in this study by a strong effect size of 0.7 standard deviations (SD). The more teachers reported that their principals engaged in such activities as being involved in helping teachers address instructional issues and being aware of instructional practices in classrooms, the more likely those teachers were to work collaboratively on professional development and instruction. The effect size reported (0.7 SD) is very telling. Where teachers reported strong instructional leadership, collaboration for instructional improvement occurred much more frequently. The downside is that where teachers felt their principal was less knowledgeable about teaching and learning and less aware of their classroom practices, the teachers reported much lower rates of collaboration. Supportive school-based leadership is a key to fostering the frequent, structured, focused collaboration present in the Goddard et al. study. Such intensive collaboration requires significant time – something that school leaders can creatively provide their teachers.

We define collaboration as the degree to which teachers work formally and frequently on instructional improvement. Collaborative practice requires more than scheduling time together or talking informally in the hallways or teachers' lounge. In order for frequent and formal, structured collaboration to have an impact, a focus on the talents of the team and a common understanding of the team's outcomes and agreements—not only about what the work is, but how it will be done—need to be expected, developed, modelled, and fostered. For collaboration to be most effective and meaningful we have found it requires:

- > identifying goals and outcomes
- > establishing trust
- > establishing agreements around process
- > developing effective communication
- > developing skill sets for dealing with difficult interactions
- > leadership support.

One way to support schools and systems as they build or expand this type of collaboration is through instructional rounds. The goals of instructional rounds include the development of observation skills and common understandings of effective teaching, as well as developing agreed upon patterns of practice that guide the work.

## Collective Efficacy

Teacher collaboration is positively and significantly related to collective efficacy beliefs. Collective efficacy refers to the perceptions of teachers in a school that as a group they can take the necessary actions to have a positive impact on students. Further, teachers' collective efficacy can be enhanced via vicarious learning. Thus, if teachers are able to spend time in colleagues' classrooms observing effective instruction, they are likely to improve their own instruction and to believe that they and other teachers in the school are able to teach all students successfully. This perceived collective efficacy is a significant positive predictor of differences among schools in student achievement. Instructional leadership is a significant positive predictor of collective efficacy beliefs through influence on teachers' collaborative work. Instructional leadership and teacher collaboration provide the enactive and vicarious experiences that can foster collective efficacy in a school and thus lead to improved

student achievement, a key goal of leadership in schools.

## Conclusion

Our approach to leadership and school improvement differs fundamentally from traditions of isolated and uncoordinated efforts too typical of education practice. A focus on the characteristics and practices of instructional leadership, collaboration, and collective efficacy are essential to supporting higher levels of student learning and improved working conditions for teachers.

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## Reference

Goddard, R. D., Goddard, Y. L., Kim, E. S. & Miller, R. (2015). A theoretical and empirical analysis of the roles of instructional leadership, teacher collaboration, and collective efficacy beliefs in support of student learning. *American Journal of Education*, 121, 501-530.