# Involving Teachers in Collaborative Efforts to Better Address the Barriers to Student Learning

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A good case has been made for greater collaboration among professionals at schools and between schools and community agencies (Adelman & Taylor, 1997; Adler & Gardner, 1994; Bruner, 1991; Dryfoos, 1994; Hooper-Briar & Lawson, 1994; Lawson & Briar-Lawson, 1997; Stoner, 1995; White & Wehlage, 1995). One aim of such collaboration is to develop efficient and effective working relationships that can enhance efforts to address barriers to student learning. Ultimately, large-scale amelioration of school failure requires the involvement of classroom teachers in a variety of collaborations.

Our focus is on collaborative roles and functions of teachers in establishing personalized classroom interventions and restructuring school resources to address barriers to student learning. We highlight current work related to (a) working with others in the classroom to prevent "garden-variety" learning and behavior problems and to minimize the need for special service referrals when problems arise; (b) teaming to manage the care of students who must be referred; and (c) involving teachers in a school-based team designed to ensure their school moves toward developing a comprehensive integrated, programmatic approach to students' problems.

## Collaborating in the Classroom

Many learning, behavior, and emotional problems can be prevented or at least minimized by ensuring that teachers are able to personalize classroom instruction (Adelman & Taylor, 1993a, 1994). One facet of this involves creating small classes out of big ones. As long as a teacher is trying to work simultaneously with all students in a large classroom or with large subgroups, it is likely that the learning of students who need considerable guidance and support will suffer, and they may disrupt the learning of others. Thus, it is essential for teachers to use strategies that allow them significant amounts of time to work with individuals and small groups during the school day.

Creating small classes out of big ones requires more than scheduling times for some students to work independently and in small, cooperative work groups. It also involves development of cross-age tutor-

ing and the recruitment and training of community volunteers to provide in-class academic and social support. The move to maintain and reintegrate special education students in regular classrooms provides an opportunity to involve resource specialists and other special education personnel as collaborators with regular classroom teachers in designing and implementing programs for *all* students who need additional support and guidance to facilitate their classroom learning and functioning.

Similar collaborations can be developed with other pupil personnel professionals so that their role in helping teachers goes beyond traditional consultation. The daily tasks of such professionals must encompass working collaboratively with teachers *in classrooms* to design and implement strategies that enable teachers to facilitate more effective student learning and performance (Adelman, 1996; Adelman & Taylor, 1997). For example, with respect to what have become known as prereferral interventions (but are better viewed as interventions that can eliminate the need to refer), such professionals can play a potent role teaming with a teacher to establish promising strategies. Moreover, new teachers and those who overrefer for special services need such specialists to work with them *in the classroom* as mentors and coaches, as contrasted to current inservice efforts that overemphasize workshop presentations and out-of-the-classroom consultations.

## Teachers as Collaborators for Case and Resource Management

Teachers are part of many committees and teams at a school. In describing school-based teams for case and resource management, we are not suggesting that all teachers can or should be included. We find, however, that some teachers want to participate and their collaborative efforts are invaluable.

*A Team to Manage Care*

When a student/family is involved with more than one intervener, case management or management of care becomes a concern (e.g., to ensure intervention coordination, improve quality of care, and enhance cost-efficacy). This is the situation when a student is referred for help over and above what a teacher can provide. As additional services are implemented, the role of teachers as primary interveners often is not capitalized upon, especially when teachers are not collaborative members of teams to manage care.

Management of care involves a variety of activity designed to ensure that student/family interests are well served (Ballew & Mink, 1986; Rothman, 1992; Weil, Karls, & Associates, 1985). At the core of the process is enhanced monitoring of care focused on the appropriateness of the chosen interventions (e.g., adequacy of client involvement, intervention planning and implementation, and progress) which requires systems for tracking student/family involvement in interventions, amassing and analyzing data on intervention planning and implementation, amassing and analyzing progress data, and recommending changes. Effective monitoring depends on information systems that enable those involved with students/families to gather, store, and retrieve data. In coming years, more and more of this information will be entered into computers to facilitate retrieval and assist with client care.

Besides monitoring processes and outcomes, management of care also involves changing interventions as necessary. Steps must be taken to improve the quality of processes, including coordination among interveners. Intervention plans must be revised to increase efficacy and minimize costs—including addressing negative side effects. Thus, management of care involves using the findings from ongoing monitoring to clarify if interventions require alteration and to identify appropriate changes. Then, the process ensures that changes are implemented with continued monitoring. Those involved in managing client care may have to advocate and broker more help and provide the linkage among services to ensure communication and coordination, including contact with care givers at home.

Who does this monitoring and management of care? Ideally, all involved parties—interveners and clients—assume these functions and become the management team. Because teachers are critical partners at almost every step, their participation as team members can be essential.

One member of the team needs to take primary responsibility for management of care (primary manager). Schools with sufficient resources often employ one staff member to fill this role for all clients. However, with the limited resources available to schools, a more practical model is to train many staff, including willing and able teachers, to share such a role. Ultimately, with proper instruction, one or more family members also may assume this role.

Primary managers of care must approach the role in a way that respects the client and conveys a sense of caring. The process is oriented to problem solving but should not be limited to problem treatments (e.g., in working on their problems, young people must not be cut off from developmental and enrichment opportunities). In most instances, a youngster's family will be integrally involved and empowered as partners, as well as recipients of care. Well-implemented management of care can help ensure that clients are helped in a comprehensive, integrated manner designed to address the whole person. A positive side effect can be enhancement of systems of care.

Management teams should meet whenever analysis of monitoring information suggests a need for program changes and at designated review periods. Between meetings, the primary manager ensures that care is appropriately monitored, team meetings are called as changes are needed, and changes are implemented. The team as a whole, however, has responsibility for designating necessary changes and working to ensure that the changes are made. A few basic tasks for primary managers of care are the following:

• Before a team meeting, write up analyses of monitoring data and any recommendations to share with the management team.

• Immediately after a team meeting, write up and circulate changes proposed by the management team and emphasize who has agreed to do which tasks and when.

• Set up a "tickler" system to remind the manager when to check on whether tasks have been accomplished.

• Follow up with team members who

have not accomplished agreed-upon tasks to see what assistance they need.

A case management team is an essential part of ensuring care is provided in a coordinated and effective manner. When students are the focus of intervention efforts, teachers not only are primary interveners, but their involvement as team members in managing care can yield substantial added value to the process.

*A Team to Manage Resources*

School practitioners are realizing that they cannot work any harder, so they must work smarter. For some, this translates into new strategies for coordinating, integrating, and redeploying resources. Such efforts start with new processes for mapping and matching resources and needs and new mechanisms for resource coordination and enhancement.

An example of a mechanism designed to reduce fragmentation and enhance resource availability and use (with a view to enhancing cost efficacy) is the concept of a resource coordinating team (Adelman, 1993; Adelman & Taylor, 1993b; Rosenblum, DiCecco, Taylor, & Adelman, 1995). This school-based team provides a vehicle for building working relationships and is a good mechanism for starting to weave together existing school and community resources and encouraging services and programs to function in an increasingly cohesive way. The team also can play a role in solving turf and operational problems, developing plans to ensure availability of a coordinated set of services, and generally improving the school's focus on developing a comprehensive, integrated approach to addressing barriers to student learning.

Among the specific concerns a coordinating team might focus on are ways to deal with crises and how to resolve dilemmas regarding consent, confidentiality, legal reporting requirements, and school district policies. With respect to planning, the team can take the lead in clarifying and advocating for programmatic needs and priorities from the perspective of a school's component to address barriers to learning. This includes programs to (a) enhance classroom-based efforts to enable learning, (b) provide prescribed student and family assistance, (c) respond to and prevent crises, (d) support transitions, (e) increase home involvement in schooling, and (f) develop greater community involvement and support, including recruitment of volunteers.

A resource coordinating team differs from teams created to review individual students (such as a student study team, a teacher assistance team, a case management team). Its focus is not on specific cases but on clarifying resources and their best use. It provides what often is a missing mechanism for managing and enhancing systems to coordinate, integrate, and strengthen interventions. For example, such a team can be assigned responsibility for (a) mapping and analyzing activity and resources with a view to improving coordination, (b) ensuring that effective systems exist for referral, case management, and quality assurance, (c) guaranteeing appropriate procedures for effective management of programs and information and for communication among school staff and with the home, and (d) exploring ways to redeploy and enhance resources—such as clarifying activities that are nonproductive and suggesting better resource use, as well as connecting with additional resources in the school district and community.

One of the primary and essential tasks of a resource coordinating team is mapping resources. The literature on resource coordination makes it clear that a first step in countering fragmentation involves identifying what resources exist at a site (e.g., enumerating programs and services that are in place to support students, families, and staff; outlining referral and case management procedures). A comprehensive form of "needs assessment" is generated as resource mapping is paired with surveys of the unmet needs of students, their families, and school staff. Based on analyses of what is available, effective, and needed, strategies can be formulated for resource enhancement. These focus on (a) outreach to link with additional resources at other schools, at district sites, and in the community and (b) better ways to use existing resources. Outreach to community agencies is easier where policy and organization exist that support school-community collaboration. However, actual establishment of formal connections remains complex and is becoming more difficult as publicly funded community resources dwindle.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of mapping and analyzing resources is that they provide a sound basis for improving cost effectiveness. In schools and community agencies, redundancy stems from ill-conceived policies and lack of coordination. This does not mean that there are unneeded personnel, but simply suggests that resources can be used in different ways to address unmet needs. Given that additional funding for reform is hard to come by, such redeployment of resources is the primary answer to the ubiquitous question: Where will we find the funds? In general, effective teams should produce savings in terms of time and resources by appropriately designing and integrating programs and services. In addition, by tapping into public health care funds, a district can underwrite the costs of some interventions.

Although a resource coordinating team might be created solely around psychosocial programs, it is meant to bring together representatives of all major programs and services supporting a school's instructional component (e.g., guidance counselors, school psychologists, nurses, social workers, attendance and dropout counselors, health educators, special education staff, and bilingual and Title I program coordinators). That includes representatives of any community agency that is significantly involved at the school. It also includes the energies and expertise of one of the site's administrators, regular classroom teachers, noncertificated staff, parents, and older students. The participation of regular classroom teachers is especially important because they must play a key role if new school-based interventions are to be adopted and implemented effectively. Involvement of parents and other nonschool staff adds an impetus to maintain regularly scheduled and task-focused meetings.

Where creation of another team is seen as a burden, existing teams can be asked to broaden their scope. Teams that already have a core of relevant expertise, such as student study teams, teacher assistance teams, and school crisis teams, have demonstrated the ability to extend their functions to encompass resource coordination. However, they must take

great care to structure their agenda so that sufficient time is devoted to the additional tasks.

Properly constituted, trained, and supported, a resource coordinating team can complement the work of the site's governing body through providing on-site overview, leadership, and advocacy for all activity aimed at addressing barriers to learning and enhancing healthy development. Having at least one representative from the resource coordinating team on the school's governing and planning bodies helps ensure that essential programs and services are maintained, improved, and increasingly integrated with classroom instruction.

## Challenges in Establishing and Maintaining Collaborative Efforts

It is relatively easy to conceive how teachers and others should collaborate at a school site. Unfortunately, turning ideas into effective practice is not an easy matter in any organization and especially in schools (e.g., see Argyris, 1993; Sarason, 1996). At each stage, anticipatable problems are more than a bit frustrating. We highlight here a few of the problems that we have encountered and some of the concepts and strategies used in addressing them.

Every effort to enhance collaboration, of course, must be prepared to deal with barriers to change and the dynamics of change. Still, the problems are often disheartening. For example, on a mundane level, we encounter constant scheduling and priority conflicts ("I would like to collaborate, but I can't make the meeting"; "I already have so much to do, I don't have time for anything more"). School staff often function reactively rather than proactively because competing demands and priorities make it difficult to stop doing things in the usual way long enough to plan ways to do things better. Problems also arise with respect to territoriality ("That's my job!"). Two basic problems in forming collaborative teams at school sites are (a) identifying and deploying committed and able personnel and (b) establishing an organizational structure that provides sufficient time and nurtures the competence and commitment of team members. Figure 1 presents a checklist of guidelines that we

1. ____ Job descriptions reflect a policy for working in a coordinated and increasingly integrated way to maximize resource use and enhance effectiveness. (This includes allocation of time and resources so that team members can build capacity and work effectively together to maximize resource coordination and enhancement.)

2. ____ Every staff member is encouraged to participate on some team to improve students' classroom functioning and can choose teams whose work interests them.

3. ____ Teams include key stakeholders (current resource staff, special project staff, teachers, site administrators, parents, older students, others from the community, including representatives of school-linked community services).

4. ____ The size of teams reflects current needs, interests, and factors associated with efficient and effective functioning. (The larger the group, the harder it is to find a meeting time and the longer each meeting tends to run. Frequency of meetings depends on the group's functions, time availability, and ambitions. Properly designed and trained teams can accomplish a great deal through informal communication and short meetings).

5. ____ There is a core of team members who have or will acquire the ability to carry out identified functions and make the mechanism work (others are auxiliary members). All are committed to the team's mission. (Building team commitment and competence should be a major focus of school management policies and programs. Because several teams require the expertise of the same personnel, some individuals will necessarily be on more than one team.)

6. ____ Each team has a dedicated leader/facilitator who is able to keep the group task-focused and productive.

7. ____ Each team has someone who records decisions and plans and reminds members of planned activities and products.

8. ____ Teams use advanced technology (management systems, electronic bulletin boards and email, resource clearinghouses) to facilitate communication, networking, program planning and implementation, linking activities, and a variety of budgeting, scheduling, and other management concerns.

**FIGURE 1. Checklist for establishing school-site collaborative teams.**

find useful in establishing effective teams.

In dealing with the problems of enhancing teacher involvement in the various forms of collaboration, the key challenges have been to overcome participants' feelings of distrust and enhance their motivation and skills for collaboration (including their sense of empowerment). Our experience supports the widely held view that trust among collaborators grows only after they learn to validate each other's contributions. Motivation and skills seem to develop best when the process is structured in a way that facilitates communication and provides support and direction. We have found it essential for teams to establish a clear agenda, have regular contacts, designate a leader, make a record of plans and assign-

ments for follow-up by individuals or subgroups, and frequently review their accomplishments to reassure themselves that the team is worth the time and energy. Reviewing progress is important because it validates a team's efforts; special recognition should be accorded to each product the group generates. Good resources are available that discuss ways to enhance team functioning (e.g., Brilhart & Galanes, 1995; Rees, 1993). Figure 2 summarizes some key points about planning and facilitating effective team meetings.

## Concluding Comments

Those who work in large school districts may imagine that collaboration is easier in smaller towns with fewer staff members to get to know one another.

The fact remains that no organization can be truly effective if everyone works in isolation. It is a simple truth that schools cannot play their role in addressing barriers to student learning and enhancing healthy development if a critical mass of stakeholders do not work together toward a shared vision. There are policies to advocate, decisions to make, problems to solve, and interventions to plan, implement, and evaluate.

Obviously, true collaboration involves more than meeting and talking. The point is to work together in ways that produce the types of actions that result in effective programs. For this to happen, steps must be taken to ensure that committees, councils, and teams are formed in ways that ensure they can be effective. That includes providing them with appropriate training, time, support, and authority to carry out their roles and functions. When such matters are ignored, groups find themselves meeting and meeting but going nowhere. It is a fantasy to think that effective collaboration can be accomplished without investing the time and resources to develop, maintain, and evolve potent mechanisms.

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However, in all settings, those asked to collaborate must feel they have a lot to gain by working together and that their efforts will be effective. Most of us know how hard it is to work effectively with a group. Teachers have jobs that allow them to carry out their duties each day in relative isolation from other staff. Despite the various frustrations they encounter, many teachers see little to be gained by joining with others. In fact, they often can point to the many committees and teams that drain their time and energy to little avail.

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