

# WINNING THE GAME

## Effective Teamwork Equals Successful School Improvement

By Canisius Tkel Filibert

Successful school improvement is an inclusive process that involves representatives from all stakeholders. These include students, parents or families, administrators and staff, and the school community at large. However, one particular group of professionals plays an invaluable role. This is the teachers, who lay the groundwork for a successful school improvement plan through effective teamwork.

In the Pacific, teamwork is a value that is already infused in the essence of island cultures and lifestyles. Teamwork in the cultural sense means taking the initiative to lend a helping hand and contribute willingly and tirelessly. In school improvement, teamwork includes the same characteristics and incorporates explicit and formal processes for effectiveness.

School improvement can be thought of as a sport in which each team member plays a vital role. The whole team has one common goal in mind: to score points and win the game. In the sport of school improvement, the opponent is the self and our willingness to make and accept changes for improvement. The court and arena of this sport is the school environment, where every facet is interconnected. There is a referee who oversees the process; this may be the principal of the school or someone higher in the educational hierarchy. There is an audience of spectators, consisting of parents and community members. They want to see improved school facilities, higher student test scores, and increased student achievement.

A winning team in the school improvement process consists of dedicated and innovative classroom teachers who want to see change and improvement. Effective collaboration and teamwork among teachers will result in appropriate changes and improved student learning. It is the teachers who either make – or break – a school improvement process. If teamwork is not at the center of their game, the plan will not succeed.

There is no question that for school improvement to be successful, effective teams and cohesive teamwork must be in

place. In his book, *The Key to Continuous School Improvement*, Mike Schmoker points out that “schools would perform better if teachers worked in focused, supportive teams” (p. 10). Schmoker notes that when teachers work and teach in isolation, learning through collegiality does not take place.



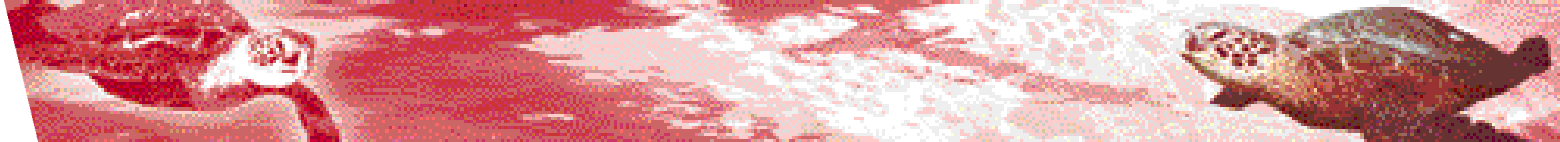
▷ Effective collaboration results in the introduction of new instructional approaches.

### Promoting Collegiality

For teachers, the most readily available source of effective professional development is each other. Collaboration through effective teamwork results in increased opportunities for teachers to improve their teaching skills and knowledge.

In their 1995 book *Successful School Restructuring*, Fred M. Newmann and Gary G. Wehlage from the Wisconsin Center for Educational Research reported on restructuring in 1,400 schools. They found that the most successful schools valued collaboration as an integral part of the restructuring process. In 1999 the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. ED) studied 18 high-poverty schools that serve at-risk youth. The U.S. ED found that in these schools as well, improvement occurred in nurturing environments that promoted cohesiveness. These are only a few of the studies conducted within the past 10 years that arrive at one conclusion: school improvement efforts will not succeed without collaborative and cohesive teamwork.

For successful teamwork, careful planning and willing



teammates are needed. Effective collaboration should be viewed as “action research” that introduces new instructional approaches in the work environment. Schmoker (pp. 16-18) lists three successful strategies for effective teamwork:

- listen before you leap;
- provide follow-up; and
- create effective structures.

For successful school improvement, teachers must listen to each other and take time to reflect. Time must be set aside for team members to discuss instructional strategies, innovative solutions, and potential results. The reflection process must also address pitfalls and how to avoid them, ways to turn

members can get a lot done in a short period of time, even in 30 minutes. It raises team meetings from the status of a mundane or mindless chore to a gathering of minds for improved results.

A well-defined agenda spells out what questions to ask, which issues to address, and how the meeting will be conducted. When items on the agenda are vague or have no relevance to those in attendance, meetings can drag out with no decisions made. Nothing is more discouraging than discussions that go on and on with no end in sight. Agenda items should be as short and simple as possible, allowing enough time for each team member to brainstorm, reflect, and share his or her thoughts. Schmoker (pp. 17-18) suggests an agenda composed of questions like these:

- Were you able to successfully implement the strategy we decided to try at the last meeting?
- What was the impact on learning and achievement?
- What evidence or results can you report?
- What difficulties did you encounter?
- How can we overcome these difficulties?

These questions help the team stay on track and focus on getting better results.

Effective teamwork does not occur automatically when professionals get together; it is too important to leave the process to chance. Careful consideration is needed to determine who should be a part of the team and who is willing to look at the present and project into the future. Collaboration will occur when members listen and reflect, re-visit past successes and failures, and come together with the same questions and goal in mind. It is similar to teamwork in any sport that involves two or more players. The goal is to score points and win the game. Every teacher has a role in the sport of school improvement, but it is effective teamwork that bonds and pulls the players together and instills a cohesive and collaborative team spirit. A winning team equals a winning school improvement plan.

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Photos: Jennifer Padua

Teachers’ ability to work together as a team can make or break a school improvement plan.

obstacles into solutions, and alternative approaches. This listening and reflection process takes place in after-school teacher meetings that every team member must attend.

### Planning Productive Meetings

Meeting on a regular basis ensures that team members are on track. However, to get results, more is needed. Follow-up is an integral part of effective teamwork. Too often ideas that came up in previous discussions or decisions made at earlier meetings get lost in the shuffle. Follow-up should focus on what worked and what didn’t, so that team members can either brainstorm new strategies or re-align their methods and solutions.

Effective meetings are conducted systematically. A good agenda is an effective structure that provides important information that team members need to prepare for the meeting. It fuels the discussion and keeps it focused, preventing time lost on non-essential or irrelevant matters. With a clear agenda, team mem-

### Suggestions for Further Reading

- Conzemius, A., & O’Neill, J. (2001). Building shared responsibility for student learning. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Conzemius, A., & O’Neill, J. (2002). The handbook for SMART school teams. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.
- Killion, J. (2002). Assessing impact: Evaluating staff development. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.
- McLaughlin, J., & Jordan, G. (1999). Logical models: A tool for telling your program’s performance story. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 22 (1), 65-72.
- Sparks, D. (2002). Designing powerful professional development for teachers and principals. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.