



## Let Teachers Work and Learn in Teams—Like Professionals

Marc Tucker

In top-performing school systems in other countries, teacher teams drive instruction.

Most of the teachers who will be working in your school five to ten years from now are already teaching there. It follows that you cannot produce the improvements needed in student performance unless you improve the teaching skills of your current teachers *and* fully support and make the best use of the new teachers you will eventually hire.

High-performing school systems in other countries do this routinely. But they don't do it by "workshopping" their teachers or creating "professional learning communities" that are sometimes only a chance for teachers to talk about whatever's on their minds while everything else in the school goes on much as it has in the past. No. High-performing jurisdictions like Shanghai in China, many Canadian provinces, and Singapore have transformed the workplace for teachers, changing it from an industrial-era workplace in which teachers are often treated like unskilled laborers into a place that feels like the kind of environments in which doctors, attorneys, architects, and engineers work (Callahan, 1964; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

But wait a minute, you say. My school isn't like a factory or assembly-line workplace. You must be talking about someone else's school. Despite impressions, however, most American schools are still organized pretty much the same way they were when the current education framework was created a century ago, when the mass-production factory was the model of effective organization. Each teacher is expected to teach her own classes for as many hours as possible while she is in the school, much like workers on an assembly line. Teachers can generally decide what goes on in their classroom, but the decisions beyond that are made by school administrators. If the administrators think the teachers need additional skills or knowledge, they can arrange to have someone give a workshop that teachers are required to attend.

In addition, just as in the old days, a teacher's job today is pretty much the same on the last day of a decades-long career as on her first day. Compensation is based on hours worked and time of service. It has little to do with the quality of work an educator does or their contribution to improving the school's effectiveness.

This description of teaching conditions closely resembles that of a turn-of-the-last-century blue-collar worker (Callahan, 1964).

### A Better Way: Teacher Professionalism

In contrast, the model of school organization I'm about to share—the one used in top-performing international systems—is based on the business model used by firms that employ large numbers

of *professionals*. Using this model makes sense for three reasons. First, top high school graduates won't consider teaching as a profession unless they are treated as high-status professionals. Second, the teachers you already have will perform at levels that will surprise you if they are given a modern, professional environment in which to work. Third, the best new teachers a principal can hire won't be able to do their best work unless they work in a place designed to take full advantage of their skill and ability. Here are some key elements of this model.

## Teachers Spend More Time in Teams, Less Time Teaching

In contrast to the United States, where teachers spend nearly all their working time in front of students, teachers in high-performing countries spend only about half their time teaching (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). What are they doing the rest of the time? And how are they producing higher student achievement than we see in our system?

With few exceptions, most of which involve supporting struggling students, the majority of these teachers' time is spent working in teams with other teachers. At any given time, a teacher might be leading a team developing a new lesson for the 9th grade math curriculum, working on another team assigned to make the whole approach to 8th grade integrated science more applied and hands-on, or participating with another team to analyze data on student absences.

The meetings of these groups aren't talkathons or just opportunities for teachers to spend time together in a group hoping to learn. Each team has a serious, important assignment with deadlines. And each assignment is expected to result in improvements to student performance. Opportunities for teachers to move ahead in their careers depend in significant measure on the contributions they make, as team leaders and members, to the systematic improvement of their school's performance. Their team contributions have a direct bearing on their career prospects, status, and financial compensation.

Top performers like Finland, Singapore, Hong Kong, and the largest Canadian provinces have discovered that engaging highly competent professional teachers in deliberately improving student performance pays large dividends. Indeed, schools in which teachers teach less and work together more produce much higher student performance than schools (like ours) in which teachers teach more and devote less time to such collaboration (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Bear in mind, however, that this works only in schools staffed by well-educated, well-trained teachers. The parts and pieces of this design are well connected.

At this point, I can hear school leaders saying this model sounds all well and good, but most U.S. schools couldn't afford to do it. It would cost too much to employ all the teachers required if classroom teachers began teaching less than half the time they are now. But in fact you wouldn't need to hire many more educators, at least in large city and suburban districts, because you'd need fewer people in the central office. As the quality of your current and new teachers rises, these teachers would need less direction and specialist support of the kind that district offices typically provide. The district should be able to reassign some of the current central office staff to teach in the schools.

And you might also be able to get by with higher student-teacher ratios. The ratio of students to teachers is usually higher in the top-performing systems. Teachers everywhere would prefer to have fewer students, but the research is clear: It's more effective to have teachers spend *less* time in front of students and *more* time working with other teachers to systematically improve instruction, even if that means larger classes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Research by OECD (2012) indicates that smaller class sizes aren't necessarily associated with higher performance. And when teachers in the top-performing countries aren't teaching class, working with other teachers, or observing colleagues, they're often tutoring students who need extra help. This is another key factor in these systems' ability to close performance gaps and raise the average achievement of all their students. So a school system faced with a choice between lowering class sizes and giving teachers more time to work together wouldn't be misguided in going with the latter option.

### Teachers Solve Problems Together

In a setting like a steel mill, when a new machine is being installed or a new technique implemented, frontline workers are taken off the line to attend a training in that new machine or technique. All training decisions are made by management. That mirrors the system of staff development in most U.S. schools, except that a fair amount of training in schools is unrelated to any reasonable criterion for what teachers need to know.

In the typical professional practice in the United States, such as law and architecture, however, the professionals are continually monitoring their field for new techniques, new research, new ideas, and new technologies that will help them do their jobs better. Professional development isn't something you do when you're not working at your job. It's woven into the job itself.

Similarly, in the countries with the best-developed forms of modern school organization, the first thing an educator team does to tackle an identified problem is conduct a worldwide literature search on the issue. They might check in with university faculty and others with expertise. Then they report back to their teammates, and the whole team uses the research to kick off their planning for fixing the problem. As they plan, they include an evaluation component, specifying what data they'll collect to measure how much progress they are making toward their goal. When they get the data, they change course as necessary. At every step in this process, team members are learning, sometimes at a breakneck pace.

But that isn't the only faculty learning this system promotes. Teachers also frequently learn from one another. Take the development of a new lesson. After a team has done the research and completed its planning, the next step is to develop the lesson, which they do in team meetings. When the first iteration of this new lesson is done, one team member demonstrates it with a classroom full of students, while the rest of the team members sit around the edges of the classroom, observing and taking notes. Then the team gathers to critique every detail of the lesson. They will do this for months, making the lesson better and better, tracking the data that shows what students experiencing that lesson are learning.

The international research team at National Center on Education and the Economy, the organization I founded, has watched lessons created in this way—and what we saw was simply stunning. In one primary school in Shanghai serving mostly low-income immigrant workers, we observed a 40-minute lesson in music theory. Among our team members was a graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music in Pennsylvania. Shaking his head, he said he'd never seen anything that could compare to the elegance and clarity of this lesson or the degree to which these students were able to quickly and completely grasp such complex topics in music.

In such a school, teachers are in each other's classrooms all the time. In some top-performing systems, teachers who want to go up the career ladder must log a minimum number of hours every year observing coworkers' classrooms. This says something about the school systems' attitudes toward teacher expertise. Another important criteria for going up the ladder is the degree to which other teachers choose to observe a particular colleague's classroom. The people who run these systems realize this is an effective measure of the regard in which a teacher's colleagues hold her or him.

In the United States, however, principals often think they need to bring in an "expert"—by definition, not a teacher—to give a workshop. According to data from OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey, half of the American teachers surveyed said they had *never* observed other teachers' classes or provided feedback to them (OECD, 2014).

Think of schools in these other systems as learning organizations, places in which teachers are learning all the time—like the students, but also like high-status professionals all over the world. Career ladders provide a strong incentive to keep learning. And the way the school is organized provides multiple ways to learn, from diving into the literature to observing first-rate teaching, to working with a mentor. In the Shanghai system, for instance, every teacher has a mentor. The message is that no matter how good you are, you can always be better. Which, as it turns out, is similar to the approach of top ballet dancers, actors, and baseball players. Even the best have coaches.

### Accountability Is Lateral

In the industrial age, frontline workers were accountable to the foreman, who was accountable to his supervisor, and so on up the chain to the CEO. But in professional service firms, the organization is more complex. There are still supervisors, and the people they supervise report to them, but professionals are also accountable to each other in important ways. In a law firm, if the legal researcher gets the research wrong, the litigator can lose the case. In a hospital emergency room, teams depend at every moment on the other team members; if the anesthesiologist screws up, it hardly matters what the surgeon does. Engineering projects are carried out by groups of pros who are highly interdependent.

In all these cases, everyone knows who is responsible for what and everyone knows who's doing his or her job—or not. If you aren't competent—or are just plain lazy—everyone knows it and no one wants you on their team. Sociologists who study organizations call this *lateral accountability*.

In the top school systems I've been describing, there is a lot of lateral accountability. If no one wants to observe in your classroom, you are in trouble. If no one wants you on their team, you are in trouble. In schools that have structures conducive to collaborative professionalism, two important things are true. First, everyone knows a lot about the competence of all the teachers, because teachers are in each other's classrooms and on each other's teams all the time. Second, everyone on the team depends on all the other members to get the work done.

In a system with strong lateral accountability, the system's performance isn't so dependent on vertical accountability to reach organizational goals. So let's ask ourselves what kind of accountability we want for teachers. If we want schools in which some teachers cover for extremely weak team members even when they are not doing the job—because they feel teachers should stick together at all costs—then by all means let's stick with a system in which all the accountability runs from the frontline worker to the supervisor. But if we want schools in which the faculty works actively to help the principal bring in strong teachers—and ease out weak teachers—let's work for a system with strong lateral accountability.

## Glowing With Pride

The rewards to school leaders for creating professional workplaces for teachers will go far beyond the continuous learning teachers will do and the expertise they will develop as a result. When teachers are treated the way high-status professionals in our society are treated, they will glow with pride instead of telling their own children to go into some other occupation, as they often do now. Many of our best high school graduates will choose teaching as a career, and they will want to stay in teaching as long as most of our engineers want to stay in engineering instead of bailing out, as too many teachers do. They will go the extra mile out of pride and commitment, rather than retreating to doing only what they have to because the system has beaten them down. They will do their very best—and their very best will be very good.

## So How Can I Start Making These Changes?

Suppose you're a school leader interested in restructuring your school or district so that teachers can spend more time in teams.

- Start a conversation in your district about the issues I've raised in terms of how the work of the school is organized, who leads it, and how time is used. Create study groups involving the staff and the school board. Ask them to read this article and other resources describing top-performing systems in more detail.
- Once you have had discussions about these ideas, choose a strategy for moving forward. Many districts will want all their schools to start doing these things at the same time, but this could mean that you're organizing the people who will resist these changes before potential supporters have shown skeptics that such restructuring will work. Talk with your school board about creating incentives for school faculties to start moving toward these new forms of organization. Incentives might include additional funds or autonomy from usual procedures and rules, including the right to hire teachers who meet certain qualifications (since this might mean going outside seniority provisions in contracts, the union would have to agree) and the right to restructure compensation and career ladders.
- Consider ways to find funding for these changes. One source is federal money earmarked for professional development of teachers. There are two other buckets: your district's professional development budget from other sources, and the money you currently spend on salary increases based on the accumulation of credits for professional learning that teachers earn. Over the long haul, as more teachers decide to stay in teaching, districts will save money they now spend because of high turnover.

## Guiding Questions

- ➔ Consider the school environment you work in: Are teachers treated as professionals who can work together to solve problems, or more like assembly-line workers who have little say in overall improvement efforts? Do they have a voice in decision making, or in refining their practice?
- ➔ Tucker says all professional learning communities should have "serious assignments" so that meetings don't just devolve into "talkathons"? What might this look like in your school or district? What assignments would you tackle first?

## References

Callahan, R. E. (1964). *Education and the cult of efficiency*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Darling-Hammond, L., Burns, D., Campbell, C., Goodwin, A. L., Hamerness, K., Low, E. L., et al. (2017). *Empowered educators: How high-performing systems shape teaching quality around the world*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

OECD. (2012, November). *Education Indicators in Focus: How does class size vary around the world*. Paris: Author.

OECD. (2014). *TALIS 2013 results: An international perspective on teaching and learning*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

Marc Tucker is founder and former CEO of the National Center on Education and the Economy and the author, most recently, of *Leading High-Performance School Systems: Lessons from the World's Best* (ASCD, 2019).