A Formative Assessment of Learning Teams in the

Milwaukee Public Schools

An Evaluation Conducted for the Milwaukee Partnership Academy

February 2006

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The findings and recommendations expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Joyce Foundation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Learning Teams were introduced into the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) in 2003 as a central reform strategy designed to help transform the culture of the schools. The role of a Learning Team is to support each MPS school in becoming a robust professional learning community focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning. Learning Teams are small working groups charged with analyzing and using various sources of data to inform the school about its performance and progress and to provide direction for instructional improvement through embedded professional development. Membership at each building includes, at minimum, the building principal, Literacy Coach, and Mathematics Teacher Leader. Additional members are identified at each school and may include other key teachers, community members, or parents.

In 2004 a proposal was submitted to the Joyce Foundation of Chicago on behalf of the Milwaukee Partnership Academy to fund a formative evaluation of Learning Teams. The intention of this project was to provide the MPA with an understanding of how well this new concept of Learning Teams was being implemented so that mid-course corrections could be made and more focused training at the school level could be provided. To this end, a highly skilled external evaluator, Dr. Antoinette Errante, Associate Professor at The Ohio State University, was identified to conduct this work. Dr. Errante is the author of this report. The project was housed in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

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Finally, and most important, this project depended on the participation of teachers and principals from Milwaukee Public Schools, who willingly shared their experiences with and perspectives about Learning Teams so that others in the district could learn from their work. Many thanks to all of them for their contribution to this project and for their commitment to the children and youth in the Milwaukee Public Schools.

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PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF EVALUATION

The purpose of this evaluation is to provide Milwaukee Public Schools (hereafter "MPS" or "the district") and the Milwaukee Partnership Academy (hereafter "MPA") with a formative assessment regarding the school-level operational development, evolution and progress of Learning Teams that can inform how MPS and the MPA support Learning Teams in the future. The evaluation is based upon focus groups and a follow-up district wide survey of administrators, teachers not on Learning Teams, and Learning Team members.

METHODOLOGY

Focus Groups

Seven two-hour focus groups were conducted between February and May 2005: two focus groups with elementary, K-8, middle school/high school principals; two focus groups with elementary, K-8, middle school and high school teachers not on Learning Teams; and three focus groups with elementary, K-8, middle and high school members of Learning Teams (excluding principals).

Principal focus group participants were selected by MPS Central Services staff to represent typical elementary, K-8, middle and high schools. Teachers not on Learning Teams were nominated by Building Representatives. MPA contacted them via letter, and from the respondents participants were chosen on a first-come, first served basis. MPA also ensured there was representation from all four value-added quadrants in the district. Learning Team members were identified from the Learning Team attendance rosters of the

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MPS district wide December 2005 professional development training; every fifth participant was chosen. From this list of every fifth participant, selection was further stratified to ensure participation from all four value-added quadrants and that no school was represented twice if at all possible (i.e. if a Learning Team's Literacy Coach was selected, their Math Teacher Leader was not). Participants were contacted via letter.

Districtwide Survey

The survey instrument was developed by the evaluator and Peter Maier, Associate Director of Research Services at the Center for Urban Initiatives and Research, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, with input from members of the project steering group. The survey was administered online by MPS between June and July 2005. Participation in the survey was voluntary. There were 658 respondents, roughly split (if including administrators, Math Teacher Leaders, and Literacy Coaches) between Learning Team members and teachers never on Learning Teams.

Survey Respondents by Position

- Administrator, 53, 8%
- Literacy Coach, 55, 8%
- Math Teacher Leader, 33, 5%
- Teacher formerly on Learning Team but not currently, 32, 5%
- Teacher currently on Learning Team, 164, 25%
- Teacher never on Learning Team, 314, 48%
- System missing position, 8, 1%
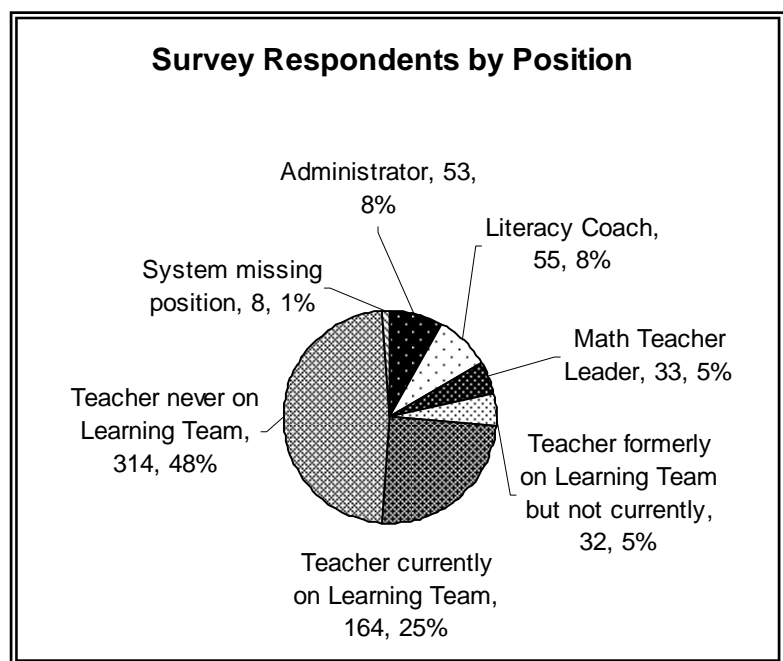
This report highlights the major findings of the evaluation.

MPS LEARNING TEAMS: A DISTRICTWIDE SNAPSHOT OF EXPERIENCES TO DATE

Overall, survey respondents-- both Learning Team members and teachers not on Learning Teams—expressed high degrees of satisfaction with their Learning Teams, with the majority of Learning Team members indicating they would like to participate in Learning Teams in the future:

	Total Number	% of all responses
Non Learning Team member: stated Learning Team is not functioning	105	16
Non Learning Team member: stated Learning Team is functioning	250	38
Learning Team member: stated Learning Team is not functioning	7	1.1
Learning Team member: stated Learning Team is functioning	296	45
Total	**658**	**100**

Focus group participants (Learning Team and non- Learning Team members) were more circumspect, with only approximately a third indicating a high degree of satisfaction with their Learning Teams. The tone of the focus groups changed from one of frustration to one of hope, however, as some teachers described their Learning Teams' employment of data driven decision-making that had been helpful to them. Participants whose own experiences with Learning Teams had not been positive became enthusiastic when colleagues' examples of Learning Team successes illustrated their possibilities for improving student achievement; they took copious notes and vowed to take these ideas back to their Learning Teams. Teachers' resistance thus appears to be linked specifically to Learning Teams that have not been able to create a climate of openness and

transparency, not to the concept of Learning Teams as they are conceived in MPS and MPA literature. Teachers who participated in the focus groups and were from schools whose Learning Teams were not effective embraced the possibilities Learning Teams held for improving teaching and learning, especially when focus group members from other schools described examples of changes that had positively affected student learning and professional growth for teachers. Survey and focus group responses were similar in identifying factors leading to satisfaction (transparency, distributed leadership and responsibility, collegiality and communication) and dissatisfaction (innovation fatigue, lack of informed dialogue between Learning Teams and staff, and autocratic leadership).

In both the surveys and focus groups, respondents indicated the primary factor contributing to the successful functioning of Learning Teams was the efforts of teachers on Learning Teams. Survey and focus group responses also indicate that to date, the most important function of Learning Teams has been in the areas of data driven decision-making and the writing of the Education Plan.

Most Learning Team member focus group participants had a clear idea that the role of their Learning Team was to move beyond the above functions and to provide leadership and vision in creating a school climate that maximized student achievement. A few felt they were nowhere near this goal; a few were excited because they felt their Learning Team had "gelled" sufficiently to provide such leadership. These were Learning Teams that had institutionalized a good system of informed dialogue with school staff and on-going school wide data-driven decision making and embedded professional development

initiatives. Most Learning Team member focus group participants fell between these two extremes, committed to becoming agents of school change but not feeling that their training, experience and efforts to engage the school staff had sufficiently "penetrated" their school's culture. Some had also begun to feel overwhelmed by the additional responsibilities and initiatives that they felt MPS was increasingly relying upon them to operationalize even as resources for doing so were diminishing. Nevertheless, they left focus group discussions hopeful that the MPS and MPA might provide them with further directives and support for continuing what the majority felt was ultimately very important work.

The most important source of conflict indicated by the focus groups was teacher representation and voice on Learning Teams. Teachers felt that Learning Teams were dominated by persons who did not have classroom experience and thus were prone to dictate strategies whose "real life" implications they did not understand. Learning Team

The most important source of conflict indicated by the focus groups was teacher representation and voice on Learning Teams.

members were aware that classroom teachers were in some cases under-represented and that this limited their work. They were sympathetic to their colleagues' concern. However, they believed this was due to the fact that their schools had limited resources to compensate teachers to meet after school hours or to provide classroom coverage for teachers to participate in Learning Teams during instructional time. This conflict was the single most important factor in creating the impression among teachers that Learning Teams were "secret clubs" with little interest in teacher input or collaboration. It also

negatively influenced teachers' perceptions of the relevance and meaning of professional development initiatives such as Learning Walks. Survey results concerning professional development initiatives (Learning Team members rate these much more positively than teachers not on Learning Teams) and the lack of communication from Learning Teams to staff seem to support these focus group findings.

Despite some of their frustrations, teachers not on Learning Teams who participated in the focus groups stressed repeatedly that they believed that their Learning Team members were "good people" trying to do their best in the middle of a challenging situation. Indeed, despite teachers feeling they lacked information about the functions of the Learning Team, many knew that their Learning Team members were frustrated and disappointed because the Learning Team had not turned out to be the professional learning community initiative they had hoped it would be. Many of them also confessed that they themselves would not want to be on the Learning Team, particularly once realizing the increasing amount of work and time commitment it appears to require.

The concerns these teachers raised were later echoed by Learning Team members themselves. Focus groups made up of Learning Team members shed light on how some Learning Team practices that teachers may have interpreted as Learning Teams being a "secret club" had more to do with Learning Teams' lack of experience and resource constraints instead. It is perhaps a testament to their fundamental respect for Learning Team members as colleagues that teachers took such pains to take extensive notes during

focus groups regarding positive Learning Team experiences to share with their own

Learning Team.

Successful Learning Team Selection Procedures Are Varied But Stress Broad Representation

Survey and focus group responses suggest the legitimacy of Learning Team member selection depends on trust and collegiality more than on any particular process. No process for selecting members appeared preferable to any other. Focus group participants indicated that all selection processes (e.g. teacher nomination/volunteers versus principal appointments) had their shortcomings; principal nomination (the most common way in which members are selected) were only perceived negatively, however, (e.g., that the principal was appointing "pets") when teachers felt a fundamental distrust of the principal. There was general consensus that member selection should promote broad representation of grade level concerns, departmental concerns, special education and multiple perspectives on student achievement.

> *I think the main thing with 5 [Learning Team members] is the 5 never changes... and in a way that's good because there's too much information to just continuously re-orientate (sic) other people. It all builds on each other … and if you would change the Learning Team that would just be not effective but yet when it's the same 5 who are getting that information all the time … it's not looked well upon the other people who are not on the Learning Team, if they think …[t] hose are the same people but yet it's not realistic to …next year have a different 5 - there's too much work to start over. (Learning Team member focus group participant, May 3, 2005)*

Learning Team Size Matters for Broad Representation

Survey and focus group responses indicate Learning Teams range in size from 5 to 17 members. In addition

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to the Principal, Literacy Coach, and Math Teacher Leader, many Learning Teams favor

grade level or departmental representation. Focus group participants expressed concern

that broad representation made the terms of Learning Team members problematic.

LEARNING TEAM VISIONS OF SUCCESS

Despite the fact the Learning Teams adapted their processes and activities to their specific

schools, some features were common to all successful Learning Teams.

Successful Learning Teams Create Communication Strategies Among and Between

The Learning Team and Staff that Fosters an Ongoing Process of Informed Dialogue

> *I opened it up for my entire staff; if they wanted to be a part of the Learning Team they could. I saw it as a way for us to dialogue about teaching and learning and looking at our academic scores… So our Learning Team meetings are open; they're published, if you wanted to you can attend, but we do have permanent representation from every grade level and from special ed.* (Elementary school principal focus group participant, February 10, 2005)

> *It seems never ending but we engage the rest of the faculty now by always posting our minutes and always having an open door… and we're blessed with an electronic system so when they log-in there's where the Learning Team minutes are… [S]o people can see what our agenda is, what we've worked on, what we've talked about, to try to take away some of the mystique about what it is this group is doing… . So we're… defining our body of work and who our group is because the district said initially there's a coach, have the principal, and then a couple others. And we realized in our scenario with about 108 teachers that would be like death. So we have this massive group of people intentionally.* (Learning Team member focus group participant, May 4, 2005)

Those teachers not on Learning Teams, as well as Learning Team members who

expressed the greatest degree of satisfaction with their Learning Teams, described teams

that have institutionalized some form of ongoing participatory informed dialogue with the

staff at-large. This is often accomplished by publishing Learning Team minutes in a

timely fashion, making Learning Team activities a standing agenda item at staff meetings,

and having grade-level or departmental representation on the Learning Teams so that

Learning Team items are also discussed at grade level or department meetings.

Successful Learning Teams are Teacher-Centered and Stress Distributed Leadership

and Responsibility

> *[Learning Teams have]… changed the role of the principal…. The… leadership style can no longer be one of a dictator. [T]he whole idea of a Learning Team is one of collaboration, so the leadership role of the principal must change if you're going to be successful.* (Elementary school principal focus group participant, February 10, 2005)

[I]f I can leave this building and the building continues to function … I've been successful because I've built the capacity to do it. If I leave this building and it collapses I didn't do the job. (MS/HS principal focus group participant, Feb. 11, 2005)

> *[At] staff meetings, we have a segmented time on what the Learning Team discussed at the one or two meetings before, and then we discuss basically, "This is what we brought up at the Learning Team meeting, what do you think about this? We see that this is happening and this is happening, this is what we came up with", and then they get our feedback. So it has been real … positive, like for instance writing samples for the upper school; six, seventh, and eight grade are doing… writing samples with rubrics…. So we read a writing sample and then we have a second writing sample and then the Learning Team sits down and goes according to the rubric at that point in time… and then grades them at one of the sessions.... And then we basically share everything at our staff meetings and see how…can we improve more and what is the next step after this. So it has been a really nice experience for us as far as the sharing …, you know, it's wonderful.* (Teacher not on Learning Team Focus group participant, March 25, 2005)

The leadership style of the Learning Team varies. On one end of the continuum there are

Learning Teams who are "mandate-forming"; that is, they have been given authority by

the principal to make and enforce decisions concerning the school's teaching and learning

initiatives. Sometimes these mandates are an extension of the principal's decisions and

sometimes the Learning Teams can carry out mandates even if the principal does not concur. On the other end of the spectrum are Learning Teams that have institutionalized some form of ongoing participatory informed dialogue with the staff at-large.

Across focus group participants (principals, teachers not on Learning Teams and Learning Team members), those who were most satisfied with their Learning Team experience noted the Learning Team alone did not set priorities for the school; such priorities had to be taken up by the school staff as a whole. Learning Teams could provide staff with data and possible options, and take a leadership role in implementing and evaluating school priorities and initiatives, but ultimately capacity-building meant engaging the school as a whole in steering the future course of teaching and learning goals. This *ethos* of capacity building and collegiality was essential to Learning Teams fostering school change.

Moreover, focus group and survey respondents noted that principals should be supportive of Learning Teams while playing a minimal role in setting their agenda and course. Survey and focus groups respondents who felt their Learning Teams were not functioning were more likely to consider their Learning Teams an enforcer of the principal's agenda or the school district's agenda. Teachers' sense of ownership of Learning Teams is thus critical to their success.

Principal focus group participants understood that Learning Teams had changed the role of the Principal, particularly with respect to the formulation, implementation and

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evaluation of their school's teaching and learning goals. While they varied in relation to their personal participation on Learning Teams from very active to a kind of "silent partner," they spoke of their role as being a combination of "coach," "facilitator" and "gopher" – that is, that their job was to secure the means and resources that could guarantee the Learning Team's success. This vision of their role reflected their broad consensus that principals not only embrace but also actively cultivate shared decision-making within their schools. Ultimately, both the principal and the Learning Team were there to promote capacity-building concerning teaching and learning objectives within the school staff.

Principal focus group respondents (as well as some teachers) noted that schools with poor climates, schools that were identified as in need of improvement, or schools that were struggling with student achievement even if not identified formally as in need of improvement might be exceptions, where strong principal and Learning Team-led leadership may be initially necessary:

> *I think in situations where a building is flourishing, where professional learning communities are established, high achievement is happening, [and] where common assessments are being developed, [shared decision-making is] all fine and good... But in my situation we're not at [that] point .... I have to be dependent on the representation ...[of] my Learning Team ... and build trust in that decision-making body because [of] the status we're at and what's at stake. So it's kind of a hybrid group which is advisory and executive –that can say "this is what we need to do to move forward." Once we get to the point where high achievement is in place and the students are learning on a daily basis, then we'll be a lot more open to those [at-large staff] inputs but right now, ... I have to look at them as the people that are helping leading us out of the desperate state that we're in.* (Elementary school principal focus group participant, Feb 10, 2005).

Some of the decisions in schools that are failing, that are sliding, while your overall thrust may be collaborative, you may have to be autocratic for a while…

Because if [the school culture is] negative, then there are some bad things that are happening and you don't have time to wait for everyone to collaborate it out. So autocratic is not necessarily bad. You make a decision and you've got to stop the slide. It can't go up until you stop the slide. Once you stop the slide, then you stabilize the school where they are, then you can assess your resources… in order to articulate a vision to move them upward. But by that time, you've had enough conversation where you begin to know who are the leaders, who are the informal leaders, are they part of the problem, are they on my side, can I get them on my side, what do I need to do to move them here. (MS/HS principal focus group participant, Feb 11, 2005)

Principals noted (based upon teacher focus group responses) that strong building level leadership in a time of crisis was only effective if they managed to gain the trust of the staff over the long term. Although the responses of some focus group participants who were teachers (those on Learning Team as well as those who were not) suggested they valued a strong principal, the single most important ingredient in creating a school environment that is supportive of Learning Teams is the trust that teachers place in the principal.

If teachers trust the principal, his/her leadership style is of little consequence and the principal will be perceived as using good judgment in how Learning Team members are identified to join the Literacy Coach and Math Teacher Leader. In situations where this level of trust exists, additional membership on Learning Teams might occur by invitation, by nomination, or by having teachers volunteer to participate. The Learning Team, in turn, will be perceived as working for the greater good of the school. Where this trust in the principal is lacking, the opposite is true, regardless of whether teachers believe his/her leadership style to be authoritative or "apparently" participatory. When it comes to

teachers' "buying into" their school Learning Teams, trust in the principal trumps leadership style.

Voting for Learning Team members, as well as self nominations, for instance, were not perceived as necessarily better selection procedures than principal nomination. These procedures might attract the most popular teachers (in the case of teacher vote) or the most enthusiastic teachers (in the case of self-nominations), but these might not necessarily be the most qualified teachers for the Learning Team. What this discussion clearly indicates is the importance of teachers' trust in principal leadership in embracing any new school initiative, including Learning Teams. It also demonstrates that "one size does not fit all" when it comes to creating effective Learning Teams.

How does a principal build trust in a school climate context where strong leadership might be necessary? Or rather, what distinguishes "good" strong principal leadership from "bad" strong principal leadership? Examples offered by principals and teacher focus group participants from contexts where stronger principalship might be appropriate made clear distinctions between strong principals whom teachers trusted and those who were authoritative and whom teachers did not support: "good" strong principals were transparent in their decision-making. It was their ongoing acknowledgement of and communication with teachers concerning their decisions that facilitated teachers' trust.

Successful Learning Teams Seamlessly Weave Data-Driven Decision-Making and Embedded Professional Development

According to focus group participants (teachers not on Learning Team and Learning Team members), successful Learning Teams are utilizing schoolwide data to detect areas where achievement needs improvement and have, along with the staff, decided on some classroom practices that would *assist and monitor* students' proficiency. These were ongoing schoolwide initiatives that enabled teachers to plot individual students' progress and achievement. Such initiatives allowed teachers to have a better sense of the efficacy of their own teaching practices and modify them accordingly. Good data-driven decision-making thus naturally and tangibly facilitated teachers' improvement of their practice and assessment of student learning.

> *This year … the Learning Team … looked at some test scores and … tried to show where the kids were losing it in certain areas; math, and it really, really targeted writing... So what [the Learning Team] implemented was we have to do a writing block every day. So [for] … all the teachers, every 11:15 to 12 o'clock is writing block. So they make copies every week, brainstorm, rough draft and final copy, and so within a week we take this and we switch it with a buddy teacher, we score it, we switch with a buddy teacher, and then from there they switch - and I think the Learning Team …took the papers that we scored trying to make sure that we were on the same track …. And so from there they're gathering that data and they're gonna tell us what happened. .So…. this year I was really proud of what the Learning Team did because I was able to see .. some data of how this piece was doing and I just hated they had to add that writing block in but I see a difference with my kids.* (Focus group participant, teacher not on Learning Team March 22, 2005)

...[O]ur math scores were some of the lowest ... So [every Friday, we]... have a 1st and 2nd grade problem and a 3rd through 5th grade problem. At 8:30 everybody stops what they're doing and they have two 4th and 5th graders that get on the air... [The students give grades 1 and 2 the problem and say] "Now remember you've had to show your answers and write how you did it and you can draw pictures too." And then "okay 3rd through 5th graders here's your problem." We get a half-hour, we work on it, [and then the students say] "we'll be back at 9 o'clock to collect your problems." The Literacy Coach and someone else corrects the problems and at the end of the day they announce 2 winners. And one of our Learning Team members went out into the community and got McDonald's coupons and Culver's this and that so that each kid that wins and has it right and has the answer and

the written response and pictures to show it then they get [a prize]. So we took that data, [looked at] what's gonna be on the next [WKCE] test, [and as a Learning Team asked] how can we implement it in our classrooms right now? (Learning Team member focus group participant, May 5, 2005).

WHAT LEARNING TEAMS CAN ACCOMPLISH

The primary focus of this evaluation was the school-level operational development of Learning Teams; that is, the *processes* by which Learning Teams are "becoming" and "gelling" and the challenges and successes they have faced in doing so. As MPS and MPA expected, there is a wide degree of variation across the district because Learning Teams are evolving in pre-existing school settings which differ with respect to a variety of circumstances that can influence the development and progress of Learning Teams, such as school climate, teacher morale, principal support for Learning Teams, and school resources. Still, and despite the focus on the operational evolution of Learning Teams, the findings from focus group participant experiences with Learning Teams that have sufficiently "gelled" suggest that successful Learning Teams can begin to turn around some of the very circumstances that might initially challenge

Successful Learning Teams can begin to turn around some of the very circumstances that might initially challenge them, namely school climate and teacher morale.

them, namely school climate and teacher morale. Learning Teams can do this by providing teachers with experiences that they find improve their effectiveness in the classroom. The surveys and focus groups suggest that across the school district, Learning Teams are focusing the majority of their attention on data driven decision-making and the writing of the Educational Plan. The focus groups suggest that the most successful Learning Teams have integrated data-driven decision-making and embedded professional development by

providing teachers with strategies for using student assessments to improve their teaching practices and monitor student achievement. While this list is surely not exhaustive and focuses on Learning Teams current areas of interest, here are some concrete examples of how Learning Teams have changed teaching practice:

(1) **Successful Learning Teams are changing the culture of student assessment by making "true believers" of teachers skeptical of the utility of standardized tests for improving *individual* student achievement.** Teacher's frustration with the time spent on test taking and their diminishing returns with respect to student achievement takes an enormous toll on teachers. It affects their morale and contributes to their sense of innovation exhaustion. Successful Learning Teams have translated schoolwide proficiency test scores into the following series of competencies and opportunities that have enabled teachers to experience for themselves the utility of data driven assessments for improving student achievements. In particular, these Learning Teams:

- provide teachers with opportunities to explore teaching practices that address areas in need of improvement with respect to student achievement;
- provide teachers with opportunities to conduct ongoing classroom-based assessments that can inform them regarding the efficacy of their teaching practices.

(2) **Successful Learning Teams are honing teachers' skills in utilizing student assessment data to improve their classroom practice.** These Learning Teams

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- focus on the implications of schoolwide and grade-level test score data for individual teachers' classrooms and students;

- refine teachers' skills in classroom based assessments of student achievement in order to more closely monitor individual student, grade-level and schoolwide trends.

(3) **Having identified students' proficiency areas in need of improvement, successful Learning Teams have increased teachers' opportunities to find and incorporate alternative teaching strategies.** Sometimes, once teachers understand how student assessment data can inform their understanding of students' need, teachers' themselves are inspired to think "outside the box." In other instances Learning Teams contribute to embedded professional development by:

- applying for schoolwide professional development grants on topics of particular interest to teachers;

- sharing professional development training they have received with their colleagues;

- creating a more collegial environment where teachers feel comfortable being observed or observing other teachers in order to generate "fresh ideas."

(4) **Successful Learning Teams have fostered greater curriculum alignment across grade levels.** Some Learning Teams have instituted a weekly schoolwide problem solving activity that provides teachers ongoing assessments of how

individual students, grade-levels or departments are performing with respect to specific academic proficiency goals such math or literacy. Other Learning Teams make sure they have grade-level or departmental representation. In either case, these Learning Teams are fostering collaboration and unity of academic mission across grade levels and schools. Because this facilitates a developmental approach to child learning, it also facilitates teachers working together on curricular guidelines that are comprehensive in terms of scope and sequence.

(5) **Successful Learning Teams can foster a positive school climate by harnessing the natural desire of teachers to improve student achievement in positive and constructive ways.** The more teachers experience that their efforts are resulting in greater student achievement, the more motivated they become to work collaboratively to continue to do so.

These accomplishments constitute a short list based upon a few hours of discussion among MPS teachers. Nevertheless, they suggest some of the promising ways that Learning Teams are making a difference in improving student achievement and creating schools that are authentic learning organizations.

CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS
OR
"How To Succeed In Undermining Your Learning Team Without Even Trying"

In articulating the many ways in which Learning Teams could be effective vehicles for improving student achievement, focus group participants (principals, teachers not on

Learning Teams as well as Learning Team members) also demonstrated a keen sense of the conditions that could readily compromise the work of Learning Teams. There was such agreement in the responses across focus groups in terms of what practices could compromise the effectiveness of Learning Teams that the evaluator began asking focus group participants, "If you could write a manual entitled *How to Succeed in Undermining Your Learning Team without Even Trying,* what would you include?" The following is a compilation of their responses—in other words, a guide to what should be avoided.

- MPS should be certain to increasingly place more responsibilities on Learning Teams while diminishing district wide training and ongoing support so that Learning Teams feel especially isolated.

- Principals and/or Learning Teams should dictate mandates to rest of staff.

- Principals should appoint their friends or like-minded teachers to Learning Teams.

- Make Learning Teams exclusive; disregard broad representation.

- Don't listen.

- Don't be accessible.

- Conduct Learning Team business secretively.

- Learning Team members should spend an inordinate amount of time in professional development initiatives they never share with the rest of staff.

- Punish teachers who express dissent in relation to Learning Team mandates.

- Mandate areas in which teachers need to improve student achievement and/or quantify the degree of improvement being mandated but do not discuss practical strategies for achieving or measuring improvements with teachers.

- Create Learning Teams that are composed primarily of administrators and educational specialists who have had little recent classroom experiences.

- Treat your colleagues as inexperienced lazy professionals. This is especially effective when there are few or no classroom teachers on the Learning Team.

- Limit classroom teacher members of Learning Teams to novice teachers, who then may be called upon to observe and provide feedback on the classroom practices of experienced teachers and impose improvements on them.

Some focus group participants good-naturedly admitted that while the above lessons appeared to be "no brainers," they had learned some of the above lessons through trial and error, and from learning that their actions had had unintended consequences. For instance, it had not occurred to some principals or other Learning Team members that they should make an effort to make their meeting minutes public because otherwise their colleagues might come to perceive their work as "secret" or elitist; they were just scrambling to get through their Learning Teams' initiatives and work. Once the suggestion was made by colleagues in other buildings or at a districtwide training session that minutes should be shared, however, they could see the benefits. This was confirmed time and again

throughout focus groups; while some focus group participants had developed a clear sensitivity concerning the need for transparency regarding Learning Team initiatives, for others, these issues and the actions to address them (sharing minutes, presenting updates at staff meetings) came as an

epiphany. And so while the above list is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, it does reflect some of the concerns and challenges facing the progress of even the most well-intentioned Learning Teams: innovation fatigue, Learning Team burnout, school wide opportunity costs of Learning Team members' professional development, and the low participation of classroom teachers on some Learning Teams.

TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATORS' "INNOVATION FATIGUE" COMPROMISES COMMITMENT TO LEARNING TEAMS

In focus groups, principals, teachers not on Learning Teams and Learning Team members alike expressed concern that Learning Teams not become another "district fad" and expressed wariness concerning the districts' tendency (in their view) to constantly implement new reforms. Teachers not on Learning Teams as well as Learning Team members believed that the challenges of dealing with MPS's shifting school reform initiatives were exacerbated by the high degree of flux in their student's lives caused by poverty and high rates of mobility. In an era of ever diminishing resources, teachers felt they were increasingly called upon to perform miracles while never being given a chance to see if the efforts and time they had already invested in student achievement would bear fruit.

"LEARNING TEAM BURNOUT" LEADS TO DIMINISHING RETURNS

Innovation fatigue was exacerbated among Learning Team members who are beginning to feel overwhelmed with their workload. Their initial enthusiasm was giving way to symptoms of burnout as they felt their efforts falling short of their hopes for Learning Teams. Learning Team members expressed deep caring for their students and respect for

their colleagues. They were well aware that some of their colleagues felt they were not consulting them enough about Learning Team activities. Indeed Learning Team focus group members spent a good amount of time asking their fellow Learning Team members for ideas about how to better establish a collaborative rapport with their colleagues. Many of them, however, were struggling with diminished school resources even as district demands on Learning Teams increased.

> *I don't think we've connected with our staff as much as I was hoping and - because there isn't time, not because we don't want to but there isn't time to share the information and maybe bring them onboard like the intent was. And yes we did learn about some new things to bring back to the staff but we don't have the time [to share it].* (Learning Team member focus group participant, May 4, 2005).

> *I do think the Learning Team is a good thing. …I]t's just that every year there's something more and more added to it which is, I think, taking away from what it used to be. It used to be people, I thought, were excited to learn about these new things and oh I didn't know this but now it's just like as a Learning Team member you want me to do what, and then you expect me to go where? Like with any other position it seems there's more and more added to it.* (Learning Team member focus group participant, May 3, 2005)

Fewer staff meant that Learning Teams could not count on much administrative support to facilitate timely and ongoing communication by distributing minutes and meeting agendas. Instead, ensuring broad communication had become an excessive burden on Learning Team members, especially as MPS expectations of the work that Learning Teams could take on had grown exponentially. Learning Team member focus group participants felt that MPS increasingly utilized Learning Teams as enforcers or implementers of district wide strategies; this, they knew, further eroded their colleagues' perception of their role in their schools.

TEACHERS' COMMITMENT TO LEARNING TEAMS IS AFFECTED BY *VISIBLE* LEVELS OF MPS AND MPA COMMITMENT TO AND COMMUNICATION ABOUT LEARNING TEAMS

> *Why even have a Learning Team, none of us know what they are and all of us are being like told what to do by them.* (Teacher focus group participant, March 22, 2005)

[W]hat does MPS want from the Learning Team…what are their expectations for us? What is it they want us to do, they have not told us yet. (Learning Team member focus group participant, May 5, 2005)

> *It must remain a priority from the superintendent on down. We've had a lot of initiatives in this district and sometimes when somebody walks away [the initiative] goes away so really that type of support all the way through is what will keep [Learning Teams moving forward].* (Elementary school principal focus group participant, Feb 10, 2005)

Due to their levels of innovation fatigue, teachers not on Learning Teams and Learning Team members alike looked to MPS for signs that the District was truly committed to Learning Teams long-term. One of their main criteria for judging this commitment was the degree and regularity of District communication concerning Learning Teams. Unfortunately, many focus group participants (teachers not on Learning Teams as well as Learning Team members) expressed confusion concerning MPS expectations of Learning Teams. This seemed especially the case among newer Learning Team members who felt that an annual district wide "Learning Team 101" orientation would help them integrate themselves into existing Learning Teams. Learning Team members who expressed confusion regarding MPS expectations and commitment to Learning Team also communicated higher levels of "Learning Team burnout."

Moreover, principal focus group participants stressed the importance of keeping the MPA visible so that teachers could see this was a collaborative venture of MPS and the MTEA.

LACK OF COMMUNICATION FROM THE LEARNING TEAMS TO SCHOOL STAFF UNDERMINES SUPPORT FOR LEARNING TEAMS

Our school is in chaos, there is a lot, lot of tension; it is like the Learning Team versus everyone, well the Learning Team and the principal, and we want to know how it's gotten so bad. It was like we thought they would look at academics and test scores and come to establish a recommendation, not mandates; "you're doing this and that's it" and they holler at us, and they are just teachers. (Focus group participant, teacher not on Learning Team, March 23, 2005)

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Teacher 1: [W]e feel like it's the principal's group that have
           been hand selected so it's their vision, not ours, and
           this is what we're gonna do and they come back and give
           us in-services and give us assignments that we're
           supposed to do and things that we're supposed to be
           incorporating in our classroom but …

Teacher 2: There's never a discussion.

Teacher 1: No, there's no discussion, it's this is what you're
           going to do. That's the bottom line.
(Focus group participants, Teachers not on Learning Team, March
           22, 2005)
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Lack of communication and support from MPS to Learning Teams tends to lead to a lack of communication and transparency from Learning Teams to their school staff. In both the district wide survey and focus groups, lack of communication from the Learning Team to the staff rated very high among the factors needing improvement. Where Learning Teams operate in a climate of open communication and transparency, teachers are willing to give Learning Teams the benefit of the doubt, even if they have not always been clear about their role and function. Where communication and transparency in Learning Team activities do not exist, teachers' general sense of "innovation fatigue" tends to breed a high degree of skepticism regarding Learning Teams.

It should be noted that while almost all focus group teacher participants who were not on

Learning Teams felt they had not received a lot of information from their Learning Teams,

not all of them interpreted a negative meaning to this. Instead, teachers' perceptions of the

meaning behind their lack of information seemed to be affected by their degree of prior

trust in their principal as well their colleagues on the Learning Teams and their level of

innovation fatigue. Teachers who believed that Learning Teams mostly benefited

principals and Learning Teams members, and felt they had no opportunity to participate in

teaching and learning decisions led by Learning Teams, had no sense of ownership or

"buy-in."

LEARNING TEAM MEMBER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT HAS OPPORTUNITY COSTS

> *[With] the Literacy Coach… we have one person who once a week goes to these meetings and obviously if they are daylong meetings they are getting drenched with just wonderful information that should be shared with the staff. And my whole concern is, how does training one person in our building really well… help us if we are not hearing it? … I don't understand how training a group of people in any form that doesn't transcend down to others, what is the purpose, to have one really smart person on your staff?* (Teacher focus group participant, March 23, 2005).

As far as literacy coach training goes … my problem with it is that I need to hear some things more than once to learn them well or to not have 6 different things or even just 4 different things on one day an hour of each or 45 minutes of each and then go back to my building and teach other people this. It's not enough. (Learning Team member focus group participant, May 3, 2005)

> *At our school…[the Learning Team] meet once a week during the school day, [during] that meeting there is really not a lot of learning going on in the classrooms. And once a month they are going to some other…. professional development ... So we have all these people once a month out of the building and once a week in classrooms and coverage is going all over the place. …[W]hat happens to the school when they are getting this professional development, it really adds to the stress level score on that day that they are all out. It really impacts the learning going on in the school because, lets face it, there is very little learning when subs come.* (Teacher focus group participant, March 23, 2005).

Although survey respondents believed that the time Learning Team members spent receiving training added a benefit to their school, focus group participants were more circumspect regarding the opportunity cost of Learning Team initiatives; that is, were teachers and students getting a high rate of return on the resources spent on training Learning Team members? Not only were these initiatives coming at great cost to the school, but whatever the Learning Team was learning was not necessarily trickling down to the rest of the school staff.

Learning Teams with Few Classroom Teachers Lack Legitimacy, but Fewer Resources Makes Classroom Teacher Participation on Learning Teams Difficult

> *We used to have disagreements on [the Learning Team because]… I was the only classroom teacher so some of the things that they wanted the teachers to do the people that were initiating them didn't know really what they were asking us to do and they couldn't see the point .. - they thought it was always teachers didn't want to do it, it was too much work, but it was really unrealistic and it didn't have any impact. So what we had to do, they had to start going and if they had something that they wanted teachers to do they had to go in and see what the teachers were actually doing and try to incorporate what they wanted to do and with what the teachers were doing and that helped a lot.* (Learning Team member focus group participant, May 3, 2005)

…[I]f there's anybody who's gonna disagree [with the rest of the Learning Team] it's typically me because I'm the [classroom teacher] who's gonna say you've never worked with any of these [students] - the implementer, the literacy coach… they all came from a Title I reading program prior to that, they have not been in the classroom for over 10 years and so then that's a huge thing … we have been doing like school wide writing problems because our writing problems were so low and so as a Learning Team we said okay we need to get our zero percentage up a couple of points and so they would have some ideas of how they were going to implement that and they need more information, and then they just wonder why is this not happening? And so finally they went in and we said come, we invite you, the welcome mat is out there, and then when they actually have experience being in that situation they understand…. (Learning Team member focus group participant, May 3, 2005)

In focus group discussions, Learning Teams that did not include classroom teachers did not carry a great deal of weight with school staff with respect to professional development. This lack of Learning Team legitimacy affected most especially teachers' perceptions of "Learning Walks." For teachers unhappy with their Learning Teams, "Learning Team" and "Learning Walks" were closely associated. Even though Learning Walks were not initiated by Learning Teams, they are often the group within schools who organize them. Teachers were wary of the validity of both the process and the expertise of the administrators and Learning Team members coming into (and, in their view, disrupting) their classrooms.

> *The questions [asked of students during Learning Walks] are so developmentally bogus. What are you learning? Why are you learning?- so I can be smart [is probably what my kids will say]. What do you expect the kindergarteners to say?* (Teacher not on Learning Team focus group participant, March 22, 2005)

... [O]ne of our Learning Team members has only been in a classroom three years and she would be in evaluating me, that goes back to our principal who was only in a classroom a year and a half, implemented a couple years, and now feels she can write an evaluation on my…performance. (Teacher not on Learning Team focus group participant, March 23, 2005).

In focus groups, Learning Walks appeared to be the bain of the existence of teachers not on Learning Teams and Learning Team members alike. For the most part Learning Team members felt they had no clear answer to classroom teachers' challenges to them concerning this initiative: what is the value added to student achievement and professional development from these Learning Walks? Teachers not on Learning Teams felt the Learning Walks were at best insulting and at worst disruptive. Learning Team members knew their colleagues resented the Learning Walks but many did not know how to ameliorate the situation.

A few minority voices among Learning Team members and teachers not on Learning Teams shared some more positive experiences; they were identical and based upon two-way dialogue between staff and Learning Team members (for example, Learning Team members invite other teachers to observe *them* first), transparency, and tangible evidence that Learning Team initiatives were leading to higher student achievement and/or professional growth. These positive examples changed the tenor of the focus group discussions with even the most apparently resistant teacher becoming more receptive to the idea of peer coaching. Learning Teams that

A few voices shared positive experiences as tangible evidence that Learning Team initiatives were leading to higher student achievement and/or professional growth.

gave teachers the impression of being a covert or secret club did not facilitate the kind of trust and collegiality necessary for teachers to be receptive to peer coaching. In some cases, this was exacerbated by the fact that, aside from administrators, only novice teachers were on the Learning Team.

MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Given the experiences to date with Learning Teams, the focus groups and survey responses were quite similar in identifying the ways in which Learning Teams could be supported in the future.

- The MPA and MPS should continue to collaborate to provide ongoing communication, research and directives to Learning Teams and school staff district wide to promote understanding of and support for Learning Teams. These directives should stress the importance of (1) Learning Teams as an extension of staff, (2) Learning Teams

developing structures that encourage informed dialogue among and between the Learning Team and staff and transparency regarding Learning Team initiatives; and (3) greater joint participation between staff and Learning Team on setting school goals.

- MPS and the MPA should collaborate to provide ongoing opportunities to share Learning Team best practices through such initiatives as:

  - o Annual Learning Team orientations for new and returning Learning Team members.
  - o Online courses concerning various Learning Team components (e.g., assessments, curriculum alignment, peer coaching) open to staff district wide as well as Learning Team members. This helps facilitate the rotation of staff onto Learning Teams, provides opportunities for Learning Team members to refresh their training, and mitigates some of the school disruptions that occur when large numbers of Learning Team members are involved in meeting or training during instructional times
  - o Electronic discussion groups concerning Learning Teams district wide so that educators can discuss their experiences with colleagues.

- MPS should continue to institutionalize their support for Learning Teams as *a teacher-centered initiative.* Some ways in which this can be achieved include:

  - o Refine the criteria by which Learning Team progress and support is assessed on the annual evaluations of principals.

  - o Include Learning Team participation as part of job expectations of new teachers.

- MPS and the MPA should collaborate to explore options for making resources available that facilitate the participation of classroom teachers on Learning Teams. District wide professional development initiatives should engage teachers in smaller groups where they can sustain deeper conversations concerning fewer topics at any given time.

- Professional development initiatives offered to Learning Team members should take into consideration grade-level (elementary, middle and high school) differences.

- MPS should poll teachers district wide annually concerning their professional needs.

- Learning Teams should assist staff in thinking about data driven decision making as a vehicle supporting student achievement and embedded professional development. To this end, Learning Teams should assist staff in looking beyond standardized tests to classroom based assessments that can assist teachers in keeping track of the progress of individual students and specific instructional practices.

- In order to prevent Learning Team burnout, Learning Teams should consider ways in which they can collaborate and work through other groups and structures in the school, such as grade-level groups or departments.

- Learning Teams should broker induction each year and be familiar with new teachers' professional development plans (PDPs); however, they should not necessarily be viewed as solely responsible for the work of teacher induction.

The MPS and MPA commissioned this evaluation of Learning Team progress to date in order to be able to best support student achievement and teacher professional development by supporting Learning Teams in the future. Principals, teachers not on Learning Teams and Learning Team members in large part responded by asking MPS and the MPA to guarantee that the District will give them the opportunity to focus on student achievement and their professional self-realization by standing behind Learning Teams in the future.

It is, in the end, a circular process. Long before standardized tests, teachers measured their own success on the basis of the students they had "reached." Teachers' personal standards of success are very tough, for they frequently weigh the many children they "reach" against the few they feel they could not reach. It usually only takes one child they could not reach to lower their own internal "teaching score." And so it is perhaps not surprising that no matter how frustrated some teachers (on and off Learning Teams) have been with their experiences with Learning Teams to date, despite their fatigue, suspicions, and challenges, most are still willing to invest in ideas and solutions that will improve their students' achievement. They look to MPS and MPA for their commitment, guidance, morale-building and opportunities to exchange innovative ideas about how Learning Teams can be agents of school change.