A Formative Assessment of Milwaukee Public Schools' Learning Teams

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The purpose of this evaluation is to provide Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) and the Milwaukee Partnership Academy (MPA) with a formative assessment regarding the school-level operational development, evolution and progress of Learning Teams to inform how MPS and the MPA can better support Learning Teams in the future. The evaluation is based upon seven focus groups including teachers on Learning Teams, teachers not on Learning Teams, and principals. Focus groups participants were selected to represent all four value-added quadrants. Focus groups informed the development of an online survey administered district wide by MPS in June and July of 2005.

Results: Communication and Trust Are Key

Communication and transparency are key to teachers' perceptions of the efficacy of Learning Teams. Based upon this evaluation, the following picture begins to emerge regarding the genesis and progress to date of Learning Teams. The range of experiences related to operational considerations include:

Learning Team leadership and communication styles vary from "executors" to "implementers." 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 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. Participatory Learning Teams often are the "frontline" for data-driven decision-making and recommendations to staff, but the staff as a whole ultimately sets the course for teaching and learning decisions.

Legitimacy of Learning Team member selection depends on trust and collegiality more than on any particular process. No process for selecting members appeared as preferable to any other. All had their shortcomings; principal nominations were only perceived negatively (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 or departmental concerns, special education, and multiple perspectives on student achievement, with terms of service that allow for continuity but also encourage rotation across the staff.

Learning Team size matters for broad representation. Learning Teams ranged in number from 5 to 17 members. In addition to the Principal, Literacy Coach, and Math Teacher Leader, many Learning Teams favored grade level or departmental

representation. A few also mentioned including Building Representatives and parent representatives.

Data driven decision-making is the primary focus of most Learning Teams; the best data driven decision-making initiatives are ongoing, classroom-based and naturally foster embedded professional development. Teachers on and off Learning Teams reported the greatest satisfaction with ongoing school wide classroom-based assessment initiatives that allowed them to monitor the achievement of individual students.

Embedded professional development initiatives have been most successful in schools where the Learning Team has attempted to create ongoing participatory, informed dialogue with the staff at-large. The one exception appears to be in cases where Learning Teams are forming in buildings that have an existing poor climate and/or have been identified in a state of academic emergency. Both teachers and principals thought that strong leadership by the principal might be necessary in such a context and might require a strong, representative Learning Team as an extension of their authority and as a way of beginning to be participatory without counting on building consensus throughout the staff.

Strong, ongoing demonstration of MPS and MPA commitment to Learning Teams is crucial to overcome teachers' and administrators' "innovation exhaustion." Across Focus Groups participants expressed concern that Learning Teams not become another "district fad." They all expressed the importance of MPS and MPA remaining highly visible in their support of Learning Teams.

When it comes to teachers' "buying into" a school's Learning Team, trust in the principal supersedes leadership style. If teachers trust the principal, his/her leadership style is of little consequence; the principal will be perceived as using good judgment in selecting Learning Team members. The Learning Team, in turn will be perceived as working for the greater good of the school.

Results: Problems and Challenges

- Lack of two-way dialogue and communication between the Learning Team and staff in a climate of innovation exhaustion leads to mistrust regarding the purpose of Learning Teams.
- This mistrust is exacerbated by diminishing resources to schools, which has resulted in some Learning Teams appointing fewer classroom teachers. The fewer the classroom teachers on Learning Teams, the more resistant the staff to the Learning Team's embedded professional development initiatives.
- Diminished resources to schools in the form of support staff can compromise a Learning Team's capacity to maintain timely and ongoing communication with staff.
- There is a high opportunity cost to schools when a large number of Learning Team members are away for meetings/training, particularly if this training does not "trickle down" to the rest of school staff.

- Learning Team members do not in general believe they have enough time to transmit to their staff all that they have learned in their Learning Team training.
- Learning Team members expressed concern that in the last three years, the district has increased the number of initiatives in which it expects the Learning Teams to play a leadership role. Learning Teams are beginning to feel overwhelmed; it may be time to consider whether they have reached their workload capacity.
- Across Focus Groups, several conflicting narratives emerged that might be helpful to bring to district staff attention. For example, some teachers characterized Learning Teams as "secret clubs," but did not necessarily want to participate if given the opportunity.

Recommendations

Learning Team success stories exist and inspire teachers to hope for their students. The focus groups captured examples of Learning Teams that were beginning to see the fruits of some of their initiatives. These examples were extremely inspiring to teachers who were not on teams as well as to Learning Team members whose personal experiences had not been so positive. Their resistance appears to be 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, in other words, are still highly motivated to implement initiatives which can be demonstrated to bring about positive effects for their students' achievement as well as their own professional growth. The following recommendations are offered to support and sustain Learning Teams.

1. **MPS and the MPA should institutionalize their support of Learning Teams.** The visibility of the MPA can enhance teachers' understanding that learning teams are supported by both MPS and the MTEA. Ongoing institutionalized support includes:

2. **MPS and the MPA should provide ongoing opportunities to share best practices through the following types of activities:**

- Enable 4-5 Learning Teams whose school demographics are similar to meet on a continuing basis.
- Provide online courses concerning various components of Learning Teams (e.g., assessments, curriculum alignment, peer mentoring) open to staff district wide as well as Learning Team members to facilitate the rotation of staff onto the teams, provide 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 training during instructional times.
- Provide ongoing communication, research, and directives to Learning Teams and school staff district wide support to promote understanding of and support for Learning Teams. This might include annual Learning Team orientations for new and returning Learning Team members and Learning Team participation as part of job expectations of new teachers.

- In addition to embedded professional development, provide teachers with opportunities to meet with colleagues district wide and discuss their progress and share best practices; this can prevent feelings of isolation and "reinventing the wheel". This includes creating district wide electronic discussion groups.
- Create district wide professional development initiatives that involve teachers in smaller groups where they can sustain deeper conversations concerning fewer topics; this includes initiatives tailored to grade-level and departmental needs.

3. **Continue and reinforce the inclusion of Learning Team support and progress as a criterion on annual evaluations of principals.**

4. **MPS should poll all teachers, and Learning Team members specifically, on an annual basis concerning their professional development needs.**

5. **Based upon the Focus Groups, the evaluator suggests that Learning Teams could use additional assistance in developing criteria for evaluating the impact of their initiatives on student achievement.** An emphasis on initiatives that improve ongoing and classroom-level assessments allow teachers to have a better sense of the efficacy of their own teaching practices and modify them accordingly.

6. **MPS and MPS should continue to explore options for making resources available that facilitate the participation of classroom teachers on Learning Teams, and think creative about various forms of compensation for participation.**

(A copy of the full report can be found on the MPA Publications page of the Milwaukee Partnership Academy Web site at www.milwaukeepartnershipacademy.org)