

Multi-faceted, Cross-generational Learning Teams for the 21st Century

By Karen Smith

“A highly qualified teacher in every classroom” is an idea whose time has passed. What is needed is high-quality teaching in every classroom. But quality teaching in the 21st century is no longer the product of individual teachers working in isolation. Instead, quality teaching is the result of a collaborative culture that empowers teachers to work together and improve teaching and learning beyond what any one of them can accomplish alone.

Teamwork is already the path to high performance in many other professions. Consider, for example, the medical profession where a doctor, a nurse, an intern, and a specialist each contributes a unique set of abilities and knowledge to diagnose, treat, and provide effective care for patients. What if the same kind of cross-functional, multi-skilled teams were the norm in education? What if teachers in our schools, instead of working alone, were empowered to come together in teams of veterans and novices, educators and non-educators, each offering unique perspectives and diverse experiences, yet all focused on student learning and all sharing joint accountability for student success?

This kind of teaming does not come easily, largely because the culture of stand-and-deliver is deeply engrained in our schools. To be effective, learning teams must be more than collegial; they must be collaborative. And this begins with a willingness to teach in the open, to be receptive to improvement, to trust one’s colleagues, and to focus on the collective goal of improved student learning.

Such teams, as Michael Fullan (2005) points out in *On Common Ground*, “dig deeply into learning. They engage in disciplined inquiry and continuous improvement in order to ‘raise the bar’ and ‘close the gap’ of student learning and achievement” (209). Ultimately, they leverage the best of each individual’s abilities and knowledge and contribute greatly to the ultimate goal of education: improved student learning. **High-quality teaching in the 21st century is a team endeavor.**

Crisis? ... or the Opportunity of a Lifetime?

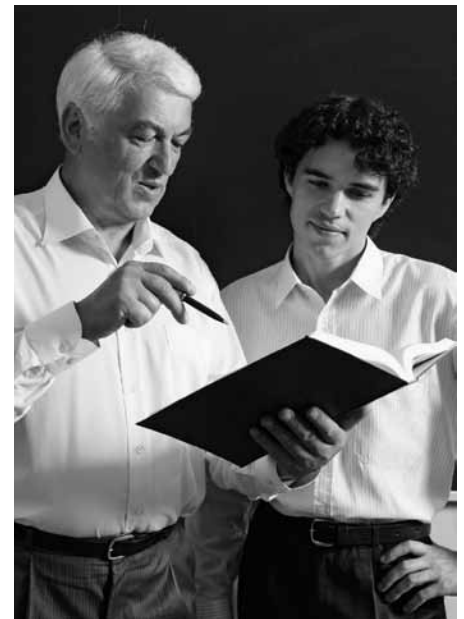
The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF) recently completed an analysis of twenty years of data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) *Schools and Staffing Survey* (NCTAF, January 2010, *Who*

Will Teach? Experience Matters). This analysis points to an alarming reality: nearly half of the currently active teaching force is comprised of baby boomers who are at or near retirement. In 1976, when young boomers flooded the teaching profession, the average teacher age was 36; by 2008, it was 43. America now has the oldest teaching workforce in more than half a century, which means that huge numbers of seasoned teachers will soon walk out the door, taking their skills with them.

While the economy has recently forestalled this exodus, this slowdown is only temporary. An impending crisis awaits the nation, brought on by the retirement of massive numbers of veteran teachers. However, this demographic shift can also create a unique opportunity—perhaps an opportunity of a lifetime: to examine how to “do” education and to build a 21st century workforce based on *teams* that can support both veterans and beginners as they strive toward their next level of performance.

If schools begin now to develop collaborative learning environments with teams of veteran and novice educators working together—teams trained to share their expertise and experience with each other across the generations—they can capture and share the hard-won expertise of retiring boomers, blend it with the energy, skills, and knowledge of a new generation of young teachers, and together create teaching and learning beyond what any generation could do alone.

A national poll conducted by NCTAF in the Fall of 2008 (NCTAF, *Key Findings*) indicates that teachers would embrace such a change. Seventy-five percent of the teachers surveyed indicated that they yearn for more teaming and collaboration and over fifty percent of them said they would stay in education longer if such collaboration existed. The opportunity to create high-performing teams among today’s educators is here now...if schools and educators are willing to act quickly.



There is another reason for taking action now. These teams also provide the opportunity for skilled veteran teachers phas-

ing out of full-time teaching to explore and invent a different kind of retirement, one in which they can remain engaged in education but in new and different roles. Accomplished educators, carefully selected for their skills and invited into *extended* careers as learning team members, mentors, and coaches, can contribute the time and understanding critical to teams, creating the strong community described by Hirsh and Killion (2009): “a community built on trusting, productive relationships and comprised of a diversity of perspectives and experiences; a community where all members share accountability and responsibility for all learners, where data and reflection inform practice, and where student learning is the central focus.”

Roles for the Broader Workforce

Seventy-eight million baby boomers in the larger workforce are also approaching retirement. A Civic Ventures’ survey (2002, *The New Faces of Retirement*) found that 49 million people say they will work after retirement, and of those, 55 percent want to give back to local and school communities by working with youth and in schools. But will the schools welcome them? And even if so, how will the schools put these talents to effective use? As U.S Representative John P. Sarbanes notes, “If we are not ready, this demographic wave will crash over our heads—a wasted opportunity. But if we anticipate the potential of the Baby Boomer generation, that wave can help lift our society and propel it forward.”

Think of the learning opportunities that could take place if the physicist, who now arrives at school once a year to judge the science fair, instead comes several times throughout the year and engages with a team of teachers to design hands-on, inquiry-based science projects. Or imagine the aeronautical engineer, who currently speaks once a year at a career day, participating regularly throughout the year as part of a cross-disciplinary team of math, science, and technology teachers, building and delivering a series of hands-on learning activities on topics such as air flow and its impact on structural design. Or picture a local graphic artist visiting numerous times over the course of a semester to help a team of students and teachers become facile with the new digital art media.

What makes these talented encore careerists different from their industry counterparts? As retirees, they are no longer tied to the clock; they have time and they want to spend it constructively. They possess valuable knowledge and skills and want to give back in meaningful ways that utilize their experiences. And they personally want to keep learning and grow-

ing. What better place for that to happen than in school, as part of a learning team?

Learning teams provide a structure for educators and encore careerists to work together in extended engagement, delivering the knowledge, skills, and tools to help all students develop the competencies they need to succeed in a complex world. This is not to imply that just anyone can teach. But it does mean that if 21st century learning teams are led by accomplished and certified educators, a host of experienced individuals from the wider workforce can be deployed within those teams to make effective contributions.

To see this successful and productive collaboration in action, turn to the Howard County and Queen Anne’s County Public Schools in Maryland. During the past year, NCTAF, in partnership with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Goddard Space Flight Center, created cross-gener-

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ational learning teams focused on Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) teaching and learning. On these teams, NASA professionals with deep content knowledge and experience work shoulder-to-shoulder with high school math, science and technology teachers to design learning experiences that engage students in meaningful, extended science inquiry, and simultaneously provide teachers with embedded professional development. This team approach changed the traditional teaching model in these high schools and, at the same time, created effective new roles for NASA Goddard Space Flight Center scientists, engineers, technicians, and contractors, especially those who want to work with schools in emeritus positions or upon retirement. NASA Goddard and school personnel receive training and practice in project-based learning and professional learning communities, work side-by-side with accomplished teachers on their team, and together address real-world science content the way NASA scientists actually do—in project teams that explore questions and solve problems.

Twenty-first century schools will become great places to learn only when we make it possible for individuals to join forces with their colleagues and community members to improve student achievement. Cross-generational learning teams give everyone an opportunity to contribute his or her own skills: young teachers offering an innate ease with digital communications and collaboration tools; their more seasoned colleagues bringing a well-honed understanding of how children learn; and outside content experts effectively contributing their skills, knowledge, and hands-on experience into K-12 education. By working together, these cross-generational learning teams can develop and deliver a diversity of composition and a repertoire of strategies that can meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.



Conclusion

The nation's educational leaders need to ask themselves a very simple question: If America did not have today's schools, would it create today's schools? Rather than pouring resources into bandaging or otherwise fixing an education system designed for a different era, we must instead invest in learning teams that can create the schools we need for today. (Carroll, 2009).

By creating the collaborative time and place for dedicated veteran teachers, passionate young teachers, and engaged encore careerists to collectively focus on student learning, we can create a new model of shared knowledge, experience, and accountability that can propel student achievement beyond what anyone can do alone. Cross-generational learning teams have begun to emerge in selected locations, but the opportunity and capacity to create these teams exists every-

where. Now is the time to embrace this potential in all schools and collectively to engage all generations in multi-talented 21st century teams which will transform schools into genuine learning organizations. **Cross-generational learning teams will "create what's next"** (NCTAF, 2009 "*Learning Teams: Creating What's Next*").

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