

The Next Generation of Learning Teams

Cross-generational learning teams that bring together novice teachers with veteran teachers would address problems at both ends of the teacher pipeline — and benefit student learning at the same time.

By Tom Carroll



Imagine sending your child to a different kind of “school,” a place where teachers, students, parents, and community members work in collaboration. Your child is a member of a scientific inquiry team investigating local water quality. Your child’s teacher is still there but is now a learning-team manager, coordinating all the players — directing a team made up of a retired biology professor from the university, a water systems engineer from the city, a graduate student majoring in urban ecology, and your child and several of her classmates. Together, they’re examining runoff from a local industry and the levels of various minerals present in tap water in school and in their homes. These teams are developing hypotheses, findings, timetables, and action recommendations to share with local policy makers and the media. They focus on skill and content mastery that aligns to 21st-century curriculum standards and authentic assessment techniques. As a parent, you’re staying abreast of your child’s progress not through the traditional report card, but through a public presentation of the findings by the team of investigators, including your child.

In this cross-generational learning team, each member brings different skills

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Junlimited





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to support your child's learning — some bring deep science content knowledge, others bring real-world community service experiences, and the teacher brings knowledge of how her students learn best. As your child rushes out to school, she turns back to remind you, "Hey, don't forget, I'm staying after school to work on our lab reports — we need to get everything ready for tonight's presentation before the Public Works Commission!" And you realize she has become a 21st-century learner who will be well prepared for college, work, and civic engagement.

LEARNING TEAMS: CREATING WHAT'S NEXT

Baby Boomer retirements and a new spirit of community service are creating a once-in-a-century opportunity to transform American education into a 21st-century learning system.

Seventy-eight million Baby Boomers are becoming the largest, healthiest, and most accomplished generation of retirees in history. Half of them intend to give back to their communities in encore careers, and most of them want to do that work in schools and youth programs.

This includes over 1.7 million teachers and principals, the top 10% of whom are among the nation's most accomplished educators.

This is the generation that built the space program, nurtured the social justice movement, fostered the environmental movement, and created the technology industry. They're ready for an encore challenge.

A legion of boomers stand ready to work with today's youth to create the future. But old-fashioned schools and teaching practices stand in the way. Teaching may be the only solo-practice profession left in today's global economy. The tradition of stand-alone teaching and one-to-one tutoring limits the number of people we can deploy, it underutilizes the knowledge and skill these boomers offer, it deprives teachers of the outside expertise they need to succeed, and it falls far short of the learning needs of today's students. We need a new model. It's time to recognize that quality teaching is not an individual accomplishment.

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) is calling on the nation's leaders to mobilize an army of learning teams composed of encore retirees, veteran teachers, teaching apprentices, youth leaders, tech-savvy youth, community volunteers, and adjunct experts from industry and government. Their goal is to transform schools from teaching organizations into learning organizations.

Imagine an education system in which learners of every age and background participate in a cross-generational learning culture that fosters a common sense of purpose. Imagine collaborative learning studios embedded in school and after-school programs, as well as in museums, libraries, community centers, and online environments. Imagine youth who thrive because learning teams surround them with the support they need to succeed. Imagine a learning culture that develops the innovators, entrepreneurs, and leaders our nation needs to constructively participate in the global community. Learning teams will create what's next.

WHY LEARNING TEAMS?

Teaming Works. Consider the way nurses, interns, and specialists work in medical teams. Each person contributes varying levels and different areas of skill and expertise to diagnose, treat, and provide care for patients. Teaming leverages the best of each individual's abilities and knowledge. In schools, these teams could contribute to the paramount educational goal: improving student learning.

Quality teaching is still what matters most. But preparing today's youth for the 21st century is a demanding challenge. No teacher should be expected to do this job alone. We know from personal experience, for example, that when a parent takes a child to a pediatrician, she expects that doctor to have a team of nurses, technicians, and specialists that she can rely on to care for the child. The idea that a single teacher, working on her own, should be expected to know and do everything to meet the diverse learning needs of 30 students for a year is an idea whose time has passed. Our goal should be to surround teachers and students with the spirit and power of teamwork that is at the heart of every high-performing organization in the world.

New Demographics. Today's schools have long relied on the solid cadre of Baby Boom teachers that fill today's classrooms — but unless we change our retirement policies, they won't be with us for much longer. Fifty-three percent of today's teachers are Baby Boomers; in 18 states, more than half of the teachers are already over age 50; and in 17 states, 45% of their teaching workforce is over age 50 (Carroll and Foster 2009). With the average teacher retiring at age 59, and many states encouraging early retirements, we are at the edge of a staffing precipice.

We will not be able to address this school staffing crisis the old-fashioned way — replacing one teacher at a time. We can't recruit our way out of this problem. Replacing 1.7 million veteran teachers, including many of our most accomplished educators, with green recruits is neither educationally sound nor economically viable. It would seriously under-

ARTICLE AT A GLANCE

When the millions of teachers from the Baby Boom generation retire, it will mean the loss of their skills and experience. But changes in attitudes toward retirement will provide schools with a new resource, one that can be used to revolutionize education.

mine our ability to prepare students for the demands of today's workplace, and it might ultimately cause some school systems to collapse.

Experience Does Matter. There are some who think that we should let the Boomers go, in the belief that they are an aging workforce that should make way for new blood. But this generation of teachers includes tens of thousands of our most accomplished educators. Their departure strikes fear in the hearts of the principals who understand the consequences of losing their wisdom and deep understanding of how students learn. These school leaders know that while young teachers introduce new knowledge and energy, the attrition rate of new teachers is high and continues to grow. Almost one-third of new teachers leave their classrooms within three years; nearly half are gone after five years. In some high-need urban schools, the teacher dropout rate is even higher than the student dropout rate (Carroll 2007). Beginning teachers give many reasons for leaving as they walk out the door, but chief among them is frustration with a debilitating sense of isolation that grows out of a lack of support from more accomplished colleagues and school leaders (Ingersoll 2002).

Learning Teams Can Change This Picture. We can retain accomplished educators with cross-generational teams and give new teachers the strong induction support they need to succeed. If these teams engage veteran and novice teachers working together as coaches, mentors, online educators, learning team leaders, digital media designers, content experts, apprentices, interns, and adjuncts, they can create schools that meet student needs. In addition to orchestrating a new education workforce, learning teams will create attractive opportunities for millions of nonteaching professionals and encore retirees eager to work with digital-age teachers and tech-savvy youth. These encore retirees seek to ignite in the next generation of students the fires of learning, a passion for scientific inquiry, and a commitment to community that they experienced throughout their careers.

WHY LEARNING TEAMS WILL CREATE WHAT'S NEXT

Traditional Retirement Needs to Retire. Today's Baby Boomer teachers are a "green resource" for education. Many would love to recycle their skills and energy. Indeed, NCTAF recently surveyed a cross-section of American teachers and found that almost 60% of Boomer teachers intend to work after retirement (NCTAF 2008). But just like other professionals, teachers want new challenges and opportunities in their careers. In that same survey, about 70% of the teachers nearing retirement say

they would stay in education if they could work in new roles or participate in phased or flexible retirement. Teachers are intrigued by opportunities to remain engaged in their schools in different ways by working in teams with their colleagues. Almost 75% of teachers surveyed by NCTAF favor the idea of learning teams comprising new and veteran teachers, apprentices, adjuncts, and students.

NCTAF is working with the following organizations in which learning teams will create what's next:

- **NASA Learning Teams:** Engineers who built the space program are being deployed in schools as adjunct members in learning teams, offering their expertise in STEM fields and leading project-based lessons. Selected schools would even function as STEM teaching residencies, where teacher candidates would pursue one-year apprenticeships alongside accomplished teachers and NASA scientists.
- **Big Thought Learning Teams:** This Dallas organization integrates creative and performing arts into school and after-school programs. To recruit and train enough staff to meet the needs of a large metropolitan region, Big Thought might create a network of learning studios across school, after-school, and community programs. Studios would be staffed by learning teams composed of youth service providers, educators, artists, and industry experts.
- **Year-Round Community Learning Teams:** A growing number of communities are experimenting with year-round calendars that blend school, after-school, and project-based lessons. This restructured calendar creates the potential to merge several learning team strategies into a network of growth opportunities for youth and retirees. Both President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan have expressed support for these community centers.

These findings really aren't all that surprising. For years, we've heard teachers bemoan antiquated teaching conditions that drive them from teaching in search of new jobs or encore careers with more engaging professional and personal growth opportunities. Why not create modern teaching conditions that promote engaging opportunities through new teaching roles and flexible options?

Encore and More. Teachers aren't the only ones passing up the retirement rocking chair. The voices of teachers are echoed by more than half of the 78 million Boomers in the wider workforce who say that, following retirement, they want to help improve the quality of life in their communities (Bridgeland et al. 2008). More than half want to do that work in education or youth programs that improve the lives of young people. These Boomers

could be a huge resource if schools adopt a learning team strategy. Imagine a NASA engineer working as an adjunct teacher in partnership with accomplished educators to design and conduct project-based learning activities, or a local artist coaching students to develop and showcase their own works at a gallery — the possibilities are endless.

Join a Learning Team: Create What's Next.

If you're working to reinvent your school into a learning team or know of someone who is, please join a learning teams conversation at www.learningteams.org.

A New Kind of National Service. Learning teams respond to a new era in national service. These learning teams have the potential to leverage the human resources made possible by the Serve America Act, which includes incentives and programs for Americans of every generation, adding more than 175,000 participants to AmeriCorps and other national service programs.

The proposed “Silver Scholarships,” the “Encore Fellowships,” and “Education Corps” will give retiring boomers a hand in shaping new careers in public service.

President Obama is making national service one of his priorities. “I’ve met countless people of all ages and walks of life who want nothing more than to do their part. It’s as simple as that. All that’s required on your part is a willingness to make a difference. That is, after all, the beauty of service. Anyone can do it,” President Obama said in 2009.

In his work on encore careers, Marc Freedman suggests that “most people can’t just walk out their door and make a difference” (1999, p. 21). To productively deploy millions of Boomers from industry and government, along with hundreds of thousands of accomplished educators, we need to rethink the purpose and structure of education in this country. We need to empower learning teams to design and develop 21st-century schools that use the Boomer’s wealth of knowledge and skill to prepare today’s youth for college, work, and community affairs.

MAKING IT HAPPEN: POLICY LEVERS FOR CHANGE

Time to Rethink Pensions. If you were deciding to take your first job today, would you stay in that job for 30 years? Not likely. Those entering the workforce today can expect to have eight to 10 — and maybe more — different jobs in their lifetimes. Yet, pension and retirement policies in education are built around the notion that teaching is a lifetime career. That’s just not the reality of today’s Gen Y and Millennial young people.

At the other end of the teaching career, pension policies often encourage accomplished educators to leave the workforce early. Who says that a person in

their 50s who still has much to give should retire? Teachers are faced with pension-driven career decisions that have little to do with our goals for improving teaching quality. These early-out retirements and incentives may also be creating an adverse impact on public employee pension systems that are already severely underfunded by accelerating the departure of these Boomer teachers.

It’s time to rethink retirement in this country. States like Ohio are re-examining their retirement and pension systems to ensure they’re operating in the service of teaching quality. Arkansas and Louisiana have deferred-retirement option plans that allow teachers to continue teaching after retirement age.

Build a Fair System. Not all teachers should stay, and some may be eager to pursue new interests outside education after retirement. But accomplished educators who want to continue to contribute to the development of 21st-century learners should have the opportunity to stay if they choose. We need to work with teachers to develop fair policies for selecting and rewarding those who will be offered post-retirement education roles. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), for example, uses an assessment framework to identify accomplished teaching. The NBPTS standards provide a model that could be adapted to identify which veterans are best suited to stay in the classroom in post-retirement roles. Teacher unions may also find that this is an opportunity to reengage and recharge the profession.

Prepare Teachers as Professionals. Time and time again, new teachers tell us that they feel unprepared to meet classroom challenges in those first few years of teaching. Preparation programs aren’t adequately providing teacher candidates with an authentic experience of what teaching is like in those first few years. Teaching residencies are a promising model for creating intensive clinical internships focused on the realities of a particular district. These residencies, which are similar to medical residencies, embed teacher preparation and continuous professional development in the schools where they will be teaching. These programs strive to prepare teachers in collaborative learning cultures that will give them the necessary support to succeed.

It’s equally important for the teaching profession to sustain the growth of educators throughout their careers. No longer are teachers hired in their 20s likely to be satisfied with the same job for 30 years. Sustaining teachers’ growth throughout their careers calls for creating new roles and opportunities to support interns and apprentice teachers who develop their skills alongside more accomplished veterans. Veterans also need opportunities to take on new learning challenges with the support of

younger, millennial-age teachers who bring new skills, knowledge, and passion to learning teams.

Make School the Hub of the Community.

Learning teams support schools as community centers where students, family, school, and community work together to improve student achievement and success. A growing body of evidence shows that students fare better when the major forces in their lives come together to anchor the learning process. Learning teams can work with and incorporate other neighborhood agencies to address real-life social, economic, environmental, and health care challenges that students face.

South Carolina is one of the states working with NCTAF to transform schools into hubs in an extended community learning network. South Carolina's Inside-Out Centers for Learning change schools into personalized learning and service centers. The intention of the Inside Out Centers is to provide a seamless flow of community resources into the building and, in turn, to encourage the community to share school resources. Students will be taught according to their learning needs, while teachers work in teams to create innovative and individualized instruction in partnership with providers of medical, mental health, and dental services.

Betting on the Economy Is a Bad Bet. Skeptics might think that the collapse in school staffing brought on by the retirement of Baby Boom teachers won't actually happen. Many point to the current economic downturn as a reason that many teachers might choose to stay in education longer. But an NCTAF survey in November 2008, when the economy was looking particularly bleak, found that just 36% of teachers approaching retirement in the next five years would delay their retirement plans because of the economy. The economic downturn is temporary and won't delay the inevitable. Huge numbers of good teachers will soon walk out the door and take their skills with them, unless we provide a new staffing structure in schools that allows them to pursue a staged transition into retirement that includes flexible, part-time positions in which they can use their expertise in new ways.

NEXT STEPS

"A highly qualified teacher in every classroom" is an idea whose time has passed. What's needed is high-quality teaching in every school. Quality teaching is not an individual accomplishment, it is the result of a collaborative culture that empowers teachers to team up to improve student learning beyond what any of them can achieve alone. The No Child Left Behind Act was an industrial-era solution to factory-era problems. It needs to be replaced by a "21st-century Schools Act," with the purpose of

supporting national, state, and local leaders who are deploying learning teams to build a 21st-century education system.

Our vision is to surround teachers with the same spirit and power of collaborative teamwork that gives every other high-performing profession a competitive edge in our society. The idea that a single teacher, working alone, can know and do everything to meet the diverse learning needs of 30 students every day throughout the school year has rarely worked, and it certainly won't meet the needs of learners in years to come.

The nation's education leaders need to ask themselves a very simple question: "If we didn't have today's schools, would we create today's schools?" Rather than pouring resources into fixing an education system designed for a different era, we must instead invest in learning teams that can create the schools we need. Every child deserves access to an education system that supports successful participation in our dynamic, ever-changing, global economy. **K**

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File Name and Bibliographic Information

k0910car.pdf

Tom Carroll, The Next Generation of Learning Teams, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 91, No. 2, October 2009, pp. 8-13.

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