

# TEACHERS AS EXPERTS: A New Model for Inquiry

Picture the scene: a room full of chairs, an overhead projector set up in the front, teachers filing in late, bringing papers to grade while they sit through training for the latest initiative. More than likely, the format for the day includes an outside consultant presenting while teachers listen, possibly taking notes or reading handouts on a new strategy or record-keeping tool. This model is what most teachers have experienced as “professional development.” For years, research has supported what most educators already knew: that one-shot workshops or training opportunities without follow-up or immediate relevance to teacher needs do not impact teacher practice or student learning (Joyce and Showers, 1988). Fortunately, many districts have turned to a different model for teacher learning and school change: professional study groups.

Although the terminology differs from school to school, inquiry groups, study groups, and learning communities operate from the same fundamental principle: teachers can be experts, and learn best when exploring a question or issue that matters to them. “Participatory school-based research, like other forms of action research, can actually make changes and fix things, as well as document and evaluate. This produces concrete results and builds a democratic community,” writes Nancy Barnes, author of *What Makes Research Useful?* (*Education Week*, April 25, 2001). Teachers engaged in exploring the same question together over time describe an increased feeling of collegial support and a deeper understanding of issues they face in their classrooms and within their schools.

Teacher study groups are also representative of one of the core propositions advanced by the National Board of Teaching Standards:

**Teachers are members of learning communities.** Accomplished teachers contribute to the effectiveness of the school by working collaboratively with other professionals on instructional policy, curriculum development and staff development. They can evaluate school progress and the allocation of school resources in light of their understanding of state and local educational objectives. They are knowledgeable about specialized school and community resources that can be engaged for their students' benefit, and are skilled at employing such resources as needed. (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1989. Online: [www.nbpts.org](http://www.nbpts.org))

While many districts throughout the nation have begun to use the collaborative inquiry model to make progress towards district goals, several factors have been shown to increase the effectiveness of such teams:

1. Teachers need to have an interest in the issue being explored. Mandating study groups or choosing a topic that does not feel relevant to participants can seriously detract from the effectiveness of the research being done.
2. Teachers need to have access to multiple sources of data. Test scores, student work, demographic information, and observation are all key sources of information. “Teachers...need to understand that learning teams have a disciplined focus. They are focused around teacher learning, not school management. This is not a staff meeting. This is about student needs,” says Anne Jolly, a former Alabama Teacher of the Year and now an education specialist for SERVE, a regional educational laboratory serving the southeastern states.
3. Teachers need time to meet together to share their work and set goals. Time structured within a school day is optimal, but release time may be necessary for extended conversations or data based decision-making sessions.
4. Access to “outside experts” can be helpful in moving work forward. Asking someone to participate who is not a member of the school community can provide an objective perspective as well as processes for setting goals or analyzing data. Teachers have a great deal to do every day; asking someone to help with outside research or facilitating the research process can help avoid teacher frustration and exhaustion.

[adapted from Joan Richardson, *Tools for Schools*, National Staff Development Council: Aug./Sep. 2001]

If you are interested in learning more about collaborative inquiry groups or in speaking with CLASP Consulting about how we can support a group in your district, go to our web site at [www.massnetworks.org/projects/CLASP](http://www.massnetworks.org/projects/CLASP) or call Laura Christian at (617) 783-9988, X 121.