



# DESPITE ROUGH SEAS, TEACHERS IN RURAL MAINE SWIM TOGETHER

By Kyle Rhoads

**W**hen I became principal of Acton Elementary School in Acton, Maine, in 2003, I spent the summer interviewing staff members. Staff in this small, rural elementary school overwhelmingly expressed a desire for opportunities to learn collaboratively. The teachers described a school culture where staff did not work together but instead worked in isolation or small cliques.

As schools throughout the country attempt to improve student achievement by developing professional learning communities, administrators are placing teachers into collaborative groups. This has often led to schools “doing” professional learning communities, yet doing little to develop a culture of professional learning. The staff and I set out to shift educators’ attitudes and beliefs about professional development and create a collaborative culture with positive results for teaching and learning.

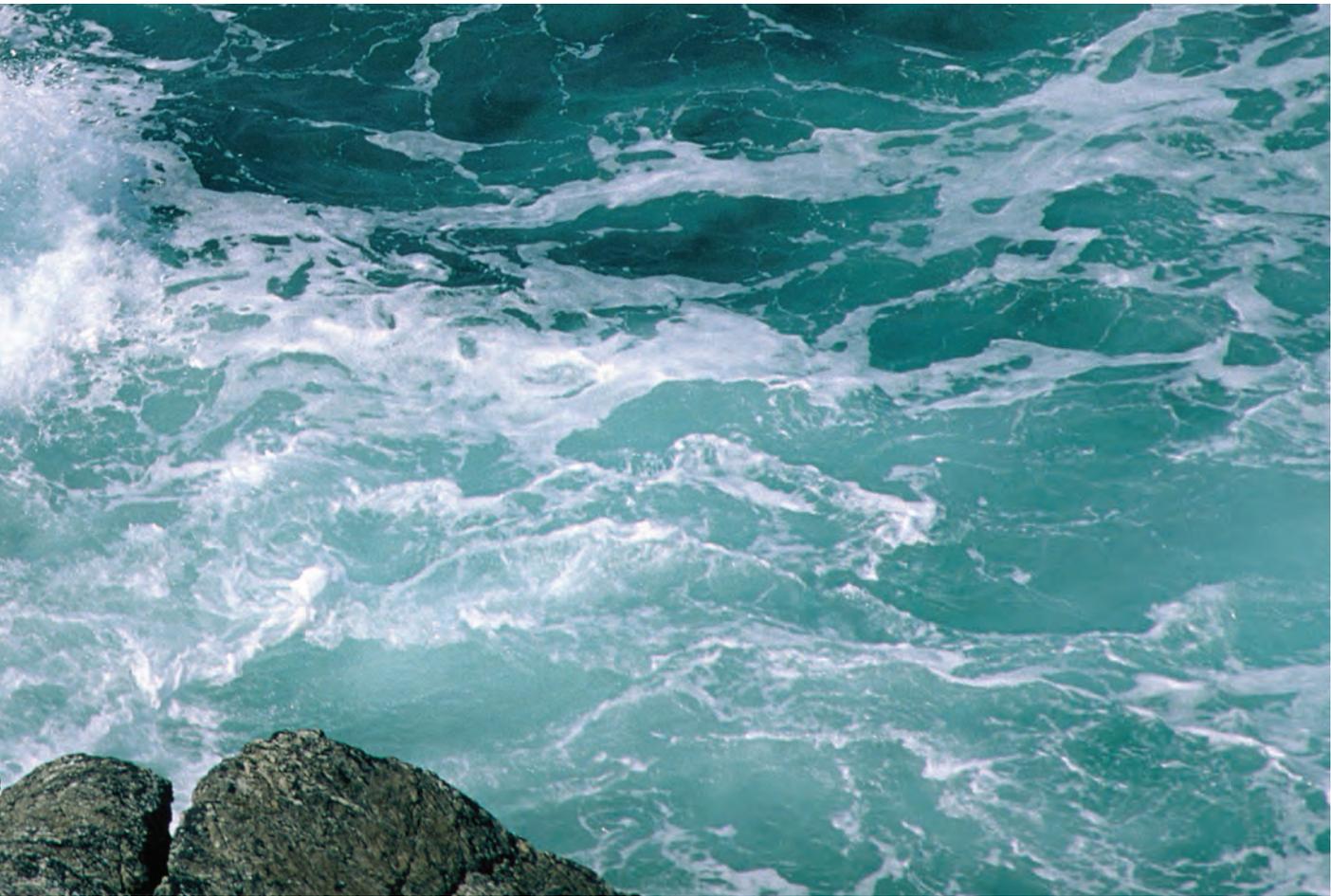
I began reading articles about teacher collaboration

using resources from Learning Forward and ASCD. I used this information to consider possible activities and grant funding resources to develop a professional learning community. I shared articles with the staff. Worried that “professional learning communities” had become a buzzword and would be viewed as another quick fix, I never uttered the words “professional learning community” until much later, when the staff had identified for themselves that collaboration was creating a professional learning community.

When the staff returned to school in the fall, we began to develop a vision of how we wanted to operate as a staff, and the theme of collaboration came up again. Random groupings of teachers drew pictures on butcher paper of how they envisioned staff members working together. Some drawings displayed analogies for future change. For example, one group drew all the teachers and administration in one boat working



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towards a common goal while the boat was floating along the ocean. The teachers also participated in a learning organization assessment in the book *Ten Steps to a Learning Organization* (Kline & Saunders, 1998) that measures an organization's ability to adapt, learn, and collaborate. We used the data collected to help plan a collaborative learning culture.

Before my arrival at the school, the staff had made minimal progress at developing a state-mandated local assessment system. The mandate was an opportunity for staff to produce results while learning how to collaborate. Federal grants funded several teachers in the position of coaches. These teacher coaches facilitated teacher meetings for developing common assessments. And, much like an athletic coach, they encouraged teacher teamwork and learning inside and outside of the classroom.

The coaches and I met monthly. I modeled how to



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facilitate meetings and used problem-solving and discussion-based approaches to lead the meetings. A grant-funded consultant trained the coaches on facilitation and team building. The teacher coaches learned about sound assessment practice, developing professional learning communities, and building productive teams. As a result of the meetings, coaches built trust in the reform and committed to produce team results. The coaches developed and exhibited leadership in ways previously not evident at the school.

### TEAM LEARNING

Coaches met regularly with their teams at either a common meeting time during the school day by creatively scheduling or during a paid after-school meeting time. We carefully designed the new meeting structure keeping in mind the need to value teachers' time. We used Schmoker's keys to effective teamwork to build structured agendas helped to effectively manage meetings (Schmoker, 2001). Teachers created grade-level expectations for students in language arts and mathematics. They shared and critiqued the assessments they developed to measure the grade-level expectations. Finally, they used the assessments to collect data on which students were not meeting the expectations so they could plan to better meet their learning needs.

The coaches facilitated teachers learning from each other. Teachers acquired professional knowledge and skills in assessment literacy, reflective practice, goal setting, collaborative problem solving, collegial discussions, and effective teaching practices. For example, teachers learned to use assessments to inform their teaching and to improve student learning. As part of meetings, teachers read Rick Stiggins' book on sound assessment practices (2001). Coaches led discussions and exercises about how to implement assessments for learning. Teams used their new knowledge and skills to build, pilot, and revise assessments to monitor student progress and inform future instruction.

The teams learned how to set goals that focused their teaching on improving student achievement. Coaches and I developed and guided teachers to use a process for creating team SMART goals (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004). Teams created norms, protocols, and meeting agendas to hold themselves accountable to their action plans and to use meeting time wisely. Teachers demonstrated knowledge of how to set SMART goals by setting achievement goals for their own classes.

We empowered meeting members to make decisions and create a shared vision. They set measurable and attainable goals to meet the legislative timeline. Elmore (2002) noted that when teams exercised authority and were given the right to develop a program that can substantially improve, change should occur, and it did.

As a school, we monitored and reflected on our progress to create a professional learning culture. Teachers responded to questionnaires, and at open forums, teachers expressed personal assessments of the progress and provided suggestions to improve our collaborative work. At meetings, teachers completed short, reflection-evaluation forms that allowed them to provide feedback on the effectiveness of meetings and team productivity. The routine of reflecting on each meeting permitted teachers to experience the power of reflective practice. Coaches, administrators, and teams used the information to plan future professional development, revise team processes, and set team goals.

### BUMPS ON OUR JOURNEY

We certainly encountered obstacles on our learning journey. Teachers were unable to claim individual identity for all of their work, and this created some dissension. Tschannen-Moran, Uline, Hoy, & Mackley (2000) wrote that it is not easy to change the teacher norms of autonomy and equality or to change the beliefs and practices that go with the norms, but that positive change occurs in teaching practice and student learning from collaboration. "My unit" and "my project" now were replaced with products such as "Grade 2 Common Writing Assessment."

Teachers' attitude to change itself presented challenges. The initial object of change as identified by Sarason (1995) is the change of attitudes and conceptions. Not all teachers viewed the meetings as productive. Teachers demonstrated resistance to changing operational structure. For example, a new teacher

### THE LEADER'S ROLE

For fellow leaders embarking in similar reform efforts, here are several suggestions for your learning journey:

- 1 Plan to address the emotional aspects of change, and include in the plan a way for staff members' emotions to be assessed and addressed.
- 2 Be cognizant that teachers may experience what Reeves calls "initiative fatigue." Help alleviate the fatigue by attempting to understand teachers' individual needs and by clarifying and narrowing the focus for the professional learning.
- 3 Be prepared to make and support structural changes within the school to sustain the reform, even though you may experience the "That is the way we have always done it" attitude.
- 4 Do not attempt to do all the work alone. By increasing leadership capacity, you may let go of some of the work and move a staff closer to a shared vision by having more people understand and work towards the vision.
- 5 Finally, be aware that many teachers will only trust you and commit to the reform when they see the benefit in the work for themselves or their students.

suggested to two veteran staff members to schedule recess at a time closer to their common lunchtime as a way to increase instructional time. They responded that they had always had recess at that time and that they could not move it.

The emotional and relational aspects of the school culture at times impeded reform and presented unexpected difficulties. Teachers felt overwhelmed by the amount of effort needed to complete the work. They did not want to expend any more energy or time to take risks or attempt a new activity. Reeves (2010) labeled this “initiative fatigue” — when the number of initiatives increases but the time, resources, and emotional energy are constant. Even with opportunities and coaches’ encouragement to experiment, adapt, or reflect on their practice, some teachers were slow to exhibit these behaviors.

Coaches, some of the teachers, and I acknowledged and addressed teachers’ emotional needs. Some teams added five- to 10-minute gripe sessions to agendas at the beginning or the end of meetings. Coaches listened to teachers’ concerns and, when appropriate, included their ideas in future team plans. They reiterated team goals and encouraged peers to remain involved in the team’s collaboration. Coaches refocused team meeting agendas to include creating team products and identify purposes for meetings. At open forums, teachers aired concerns and asked questions to better understand the reform efforts and their roles. I learned it was important for me to be visible and accessible in hallways, in team meetings, and in my office and to listen to teachers when they had something to say. I used these conversations to help communicate the vision for change and expectations for teachers to actively participate in team meetings and work toward team goals.

### REFOCUSING ON STUDENTS

Just as we were making progress, another challenge arose when the state mandate to create the local assessment system was placed on a moratorium. The vision for collaboration became unclear, and confusion flourished. Teachers wondered why they should continue meeting. Even without the state mandate, we kept the newly created structures and dedicated our efforts on using meeting time to improve student achievement. I created urgency by talking with teachers about how we were supporting students who didn’t meet grade-level expectations. We finally began to use collaboration, the essential element of DuFour’s work, as a means to improve student achievement (2004). This refocus for the teamwork reaffirmed Elmore’s statement that, “coherence emerges from the practice of learning with a shared purpose” (2002, p. 24).

With the meeting time now focused on student outcomes, teacher learning had a greater emphasis on successful teaching practices. Team analysis of student assessment data was not only used to determine goals, such as 95% of 1st-grade students reading on grade level, but to determine what practices were effective in helping students achieve grade-level expectations.

### DANCING TO CREATE TIME FOR LEARNING

A team of primary grade teachers struggled to find common meeting time during the school day. At the same time, the librarian, music teacher, art teacher, and guidance counselor struggled to implement their respective curricula within the constraints of their weekly lessons.

The librarian proposed mixing the students by grades and teaching integrated lessons for a 45-minute period each week. The specialists would design and implement the integrated curricula lessons with the help of paraprofessionals.

Students experienced highly engaging lessons with a different group of peers and teacher each week. Meanwhile, classroom teachers met to address ways to support academically struggling students. This program became known as “Word Dance,” because the learning often centered on learning the vocabulary of the curricula as students created, sang, performed, and danced.



Scheduled meeting time focused on uninterrupted, collegial discussions. By having a common language about achievement results and practice, teachers developed problem-solving skills. As some teams faced challenges in using their time effectively, coaches modeled problem solving by collectively developing tools to resolve issues. For example, sending agendas ahead of time to participants provided a structured framework for guiding their time together. Analyzing student information and the discussions that followed resulted in teams creatively determining how to intervene for struggling students. From this tight process, teachers left meetings learning from each other about

techniques and strategies to use with students in their classrooms.

Many of the obstacles disappeared once teachers experienced positive results from the reform. Team members had to trust the genuineness of the established participatory structures. During the early phases of the reform, a teacher coach commented, “We have difficulty agreeing on a time to meet.”

**Acton Elementary School**

Acton, Maine

Enrollment: **230**

Staff: **18**

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	<b>99%</b>
Black:	less than <b>1%</b>
Hispanic:	less than <b>1%</b>
Asian/Pacific Islander:	less than <b>1%</b>
Native American:	<b>0%</b>
Other:	<b>0%</b>

Limited English proficient: **0%**

Language spoken: **English**

Free/reduced lunch: **53%**

Special education: **19%**

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As they began to implement changes, teachers’ comments and actions reflected looking forward instead of dwelling on past actions and attitudes. For example, after a staff meeting to provide feedback about a piloted mathematics assessment, some team members met for an additional hour after a scheduled meeting to create a plan to use the assessment for the foreseeable future. During a two-hour team meeting, a teacher who had expressed displeasure with the collaborative learning process in the past exclaimed, “We are having fun!” The unified-arts teachers collaborated to solve problems. They created a schoolwide positive behavior program and implemented an integrated curricula program called “Word Dance,” which allowed a team of classroom teachers to meet during the school day (see box on p. 25).

The collaborative learning process continues to improve student achievement. Last year, every grade (grades 2-8) except one reported greater student growth in mathematics and language arts than the nationally normed targeted growth. The greatest result has been the improvement in student reading performance. Over a four-year period, the percentage of students in kindergarten reading on or above grade level jumped from 59% to 100%; in 1st grade, the increase was from 73% to 89%; and in 2nd grade, the increase was from 73% to 89%. Anecdotal evidence from teachers and administrators confirms the improved test scores are due to our reform efforts, specifically creating collaborative learning teams.

I learned valuable lessons for future reform initiatives with teachers. Teachers could not “do” professional learning communities. Teachers needed to develop a collaborative process and have scheduled and uninterrupted time to work together on improving teaching and learning. Routine staff reflection permitted teachers to question the initiatives, the actions, attitudes, and goals of the staff and administrators. A shared vision, as Senge (1990) wrote, transpired during the change process. Staff members were confused at first about the purpose for collaborating, and research confirms the likelihood of confusion

existing with change. I also learned the importance of creating structures, supports, and leadership to address the roadblocks and build the capacity to sustain the change. (See box on p. 24 for several suggestions for leaders implementing new changes.)

DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2004) wrote that when educators begin to work collaboratively and focus on three critical questions, they begin to function as a professional learning community. They ask: “Exactly what is it we want all students to learn?” “How will we know when each student has acquired the essential knowledge and skills?” “What happens in our school when a student does not learn?” This last question is now the focus for the teamwork that occurs and drives the ongoing work to improve student achievement. Teachers are still not doing professional learning communities, but teachers understand they “do” professional learning when collaboration is about student achievement.

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