



### What's Current?

You're Invited to a Talk-it-Over Tea Party—  
or Call it a Professional Learning Community Meeting!

Shut the classroom door! Bang! You say, “Now, just leave me alone, please! My head is swimming with meetings on standards, on tests, on data, on new curriculums, and you-name-it! Just let me teach!”

All right. But on a regular basis, open your classroom door again. Then get together with your friends on staff for a talk-it-over tea party! Talk about instruction. Currently, these get-togethers are called professional learning teams or communities.

As John Goodlad (*Behind the Classroom Door*—1970, *A Place Called School*—1984) reminded us sometime ago, isolation is an enemy of best practices, change, and increased classroom effectiveness. No teacher wants to fail or let students fail. No teacher wants to struggle, to work harder than necessary to get results. So when the door is closed and you’re too busy to open it, you’re shutting out solutions to the problems that challenge you and every teacher.

Chances are, the answers to standards, test scores, data, and new curriculums—the focus of all your meetings—are outside the closed door, right next to the teapot. Put the teapot on, have a cup with your colleagues, and discover the answers to greater *student achievement*, the issue that initiated all your meetings in the first place.

You see, the evidence confirms that teachers themselves hold the answers to increased achievement. It’s teachers—*what they teach and how they teach it*—that make the difference in student achievement. Instruction itself has by far the biggest influence on achievement—a fact often overlooked. And you and your colleagues know a lot more about instruction than you may give yourselves credit. But, note this—not *one of you knows it all*, yet *cumulatively* you know more than enough to make a difference.

“The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability for school personnel to function as professional learning communities.”  
(R. Dufour, 2004).

“This practice is embraced in virtually every professional industry, and we are way behind in instituting it in our schools.” (A. Wise, 2004).

continued . . .



## What's Current? (continued)

Call it whatever you like—a professional learning community or a teachers' tea—but faithfully get together and talk instruction.

Time devoted to instructional dialogue must be time well spent on a predetermined, specific topic. For example, related to your Sourcebook teaching, one teacher might be the “host” or “hostess” for the next get-together and ask a few days before the meeting: *How often do you check Priority Words, and how do you do it?* That, then, is the topic. At the get-together, ideas are brought to the fore, exchanged, and routines are shared. Something that may seem like a small thing to one teacher is a huge “Ah-ha!” for another teacher. The outcome is an adjustment of practices that makes teaching and learning work.

If you love glitzy solutions, this talk-it-over strategy must appear mundane. Yet, don't discount the idea too openly because its time is coming. When teachers learn that collective effort is the answer to many of today's school challenges, and teachers learn that their team-talks are, in fact, producing results—well, goodbye to the bling!

“Collective effort and intelligence are the most powerful force for [school] improvement—more powerful than the most knowledgeable individuals working alone.” (J. Little, 2003)

“Teams are genuinely smarter than the smartest people within them.” (Surowiecki, 2004)

On occasion, teachers remark following a new program's training workshop that they wish they'd had a chance during the meeting to get together in grade-level groups and process the information throughout the day as the information was shared. Yet, a program overview for any area of the curriculum is designed to simply jumpstart teachers' awareness. It provides a foundation for future growth and success that is best developed in tandem with classroom experience and professional dialogue. These two elements are as essential, if not more so, than the introductory seminar itself.

You see, true teaching expertise is not the intended outcome of a teacher-training workshop. When teachers think at the end of a training day that they still don't yet *have* it—well, they're right, they don't. But, I would not suggest they wait for the cloud to clear. Good advice is—Dive right in and give it a try! It's okay. Expertise comes later. It emerges gradually, and rarely in isolation.

It emerges through instructional experience combined with instructional dialogue about how specific classroom activities and lessons affect learning. This is the formula for success. It creates a strong momentum toward improvement. And you can do it! But not with your door closed, shutting off the experiences of your colleagues. Teaching expertise happens—together! And with it comes something to celebrate at the next tea party—gains in student achievement!

PS If you'd like another voice at one of your team's get-togethers, set up a conference call with me at the time you typically meet. Then, with a speaker phone on your end, I'll share with you other teachers' opinions about the issue you're discussing that day. Call 888-937-7355 to set up your team's conference call. Let's talk it over together!