



## CHAPTER 3

# Building the Collaborative Culture of a Professional Learning Community

## Part One

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### **The Case Study: Are We Engaged in Collaboration or “Co-blaboration”?**

Principal Joe McDonald was puzzled. He knew that building a collaborative culture was the key to improving student achievement. He could cite any number of research studies to support his position. He had worked tirelessly to promote collaboration and had taken a number of steps to support teachers working together. He organized each grade level in Nemo Middle School (nickname: the Fish) into an interdisciplinary team composed of individual mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts teachers. He created a schedule that gave teams time to meet together each day. He trained staff in collaborative skills, consensus building, and conflict resolution. He emphasized the importance of collaboration at almost every faculty meeting. He felt he had done all the right things, and for three years, he had waited patiently to reap the reward of higher levels of student learning. But to his dismay and bewilderment, every academic indicator of student achievement that the school monitored had remained essentially the same.

Principal McDonald decided to survey the faculty to see if he could discover why all the collaboration had yielded no gains in student achievement. The satisfaction survey he developed revealed that, with very few exceptions, teachers felt their collaborative time had strengthened the bond between teachers. Specialist teachers—those in art, music, physical education, technical education, and special education—were less enthusiastic and expressed some resentment about being lumped together in one collaborative team. In general, however, teachers seemed to enjoy working together.

Principal McDonald then decided to make a concerted effort to observe personally the workings of the teams. At the first meeting he attended, a seventh-grade team focused on the behavior of a student who had become increasingly disruptive. The team agreed to schedule a parent conference so it could present its concerns to the parent as a group. An eighth-grade team brainstormed strategies for achieving the team goal of reducing disciplinary referrals for tardiness to class. At a meeting of a second seventh-grade team, he observed a lively debate about whether or not members should accept late work from students, and if so, how many points they should deduct for each day the work was late. The fourth team he observed assigned roles and responsibilities to each member to ensure all the tasks associated with an upcoming field trip were addressed.

By the end of the fourth meeting, Principal McDonald had a revelation: there had been no gains in student achievement because the collaborative teams addressed topics that were only remotely related to student learning! Armed with this insight, he convened a meeting of the faculty and shared his conclusion that teams needed to shift the focus of their dialogues to curriculum, assessment, and instruction.

His proposal met with less than wild enthusiasm. Teachers pointed out that each interdisciplinary team member taught different content. How could a seventh-grade science teacher engage in meaningful work on curriculum, assessment, and instruction with a seventh-grade social studies teacher? The team of specialist teachers was even more emphatic that it was impossible for them to have meaningful conversations on those topics because of the different courses they taught. Teachers argued that since they did not share content with the colleagues on their team, it made sense that they would use their team time to focus on the one thing they did have in common: their students.

Other teachers accused Principal McDonald of abandoning the middle school concept and its commitment to the whole child. One highly emotional teacher charged Principal McDonald with selling out—disregarding the emotional well-being of the student in the pursuit of higher test scores.

The staff's reaction genuinely stunned Principal McDonald. He had always believed they enjoyed working together in their teams, and he assumed that merely shifting the focus of their collaboration would be a relatively simple matter. It now appeared, however, that although the staff were happy to collaborate regarding some aspects of the school's program, they were either disinterested or adamantly opposed to addressing others. Dispirited, he retreated to his office to ponder next steps.

## Reflection

Why did Principal McDonald's efforts to build a collaborative culture in his school go awry? What steps might he take to improve the situation?