

Collective Efficacy: Together We Can Make a Difference

By [Jenni Donohoo](#) / April 7, 2016 at 3:00 am



I recently met with school improvement teams at two secondary schools. For the past four years, both school's results were well below the Provincial average on the annual standardized literacy test. The conversation at the first school was driven by the teachers around the table. It centered on research, school-wide strategies, lessons learned from past experiences, and progress monitoring. Teachers' voices were heard as they were instrumental in determining next steps, which included designing professional learning for their peers.

Although the conversation at the second site was also driven by teachers, it was remarkably different. The teachers expressed concerns about burn-out and the majority of the conversation was centered on the high needs population they were trying their best to serve. The school had a high percentage of students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and English language learners. In addition, the majority of students came from low socio-economic backgrounds. Rather than helping to identify what could be done, the staff at the second school felt there was nothing left to try, indicating "there is *nothing* that we can do to make a difference with these kids".

The staff at the first school faced similar demographic challenges but did not let that deter them. They believed that through their collaborative efforts, they could help students achieve – in measurable ways. This team demonstrated a great sense of collective efficacy. The school improvement team at the second site believed that their efforts were in vain. Their belief was that student achievement *could not* be advanced – no matter that they did and regardless of whether they worked

together or alone. This staff was lacking both a sense of self efficacy and a sense of collective efficacy.

What Is Collective Efficacy and Why Is It Important?

When teachers believe that together, they and their colleagues can impact student achievement, they share a sense of collective efficacy. Collective efficacy refers to “the judgments of teachers in a school that the faculty as a whole can organize and execute the courses of action required to have a positive effect on students” (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2004, p.4). Collective efficacy is high when teachers believe that the staff is capable of helping students master complex content, fostering students’ creativity, and getting students to believe they can do well in school. When efficacy is high, educators show greater persistence and are more likely to try new teaching approaches. Educators with high efficacy encourage student autonomy, attend more closely to the needs of students who are not progressing well, and are able to modify students’ perceptions of their academic abilities (Ross & Bruce, 2007).

Bandura (1993) demonstrated that the effect of perceived collective efficacy on student achievement was stronger than the link between socio-economic status and student achievement. More recently, Hattie ranked collective teacher efficacy as the *number one factor* amongst all of the influences that impact student achievement (personal communication, November 19th, 2015). Eells (2011) meta-analysis demonstrated that collective efficacy and student achievement were strongly related with an effect size of 1.57 (more than double the effect size of feedback).

Efficacy beliefs are very powerful as they guide our actions and behavior. Efficacy beliefs help to determine what we focus on, how we respond to challenges, and how we expend our efforts. If educators’ realities are filtered through the belief that they can do *very little* to influence student achievement, then it is very likely these beliefs will be manifested in their practice. It’s promising to know that beliefs about our capabilities to impact student outcomes can be shaped and adjusted.

Strengthening Collective Efficacy in Schools

Rather than leaving it to chance, it is timely and important to consider how collective efficacy beliefs may be fostered in schools and organizations. Three ways to strengthen efficacy are suggested below.

#1. Create Structures and Processes for Teachers to Engage in Meaningful Collaboration

Structures and processes need to be in place for teachers to come together to solve problems of practice collaboratively. Teachers need time (during the instructional day) and spaces (conducive to learning) where they can meet regularly. They also need to be introduced to processes that support joint-work (Little, 1990) and aid in addressing challenges related to learning and teaching.

One process that has been found particularly effective in increasing efficacy is collaborative inquiry. Voelkel Jr. (2011) demonstrated a positive relationship between collective efficacy and professional learning communities characterized by collaboration and inquiry. Langer and Colton (2005) noted that “schools that engage in collaborative inquiry develop a sense of collective efficacy that helps educators reconnect with their original point of passion: ensuring student success” (p. 26). When educators collaborate and develop solutions to address their problems of practice, efficacy increases.

Collaborative inquiry situates teachers’ everyday work as the central focus for their learning. Teams identify student learning needs, investigate promising approaches, test new strategies in their classrooms, collect evidence, collectively examine results, and determine next steps. As noted by Fullan and Quinn (2016) “the leader who helps develop focused collective capacity will make the greatest contribution to student learning” (p. 57).

#2. Promote Teacher Leadership and Extend Teachers’ Decision-Making Power

The power to shift practice and improve student achievement lies in the hands of teachers who need to be entrusted with the responsibility of shaping and enacting change initiatives. Teachers as change agents have the potential to transform their classrooms, schools, and communities. Fostering teacher leadership is not only a viable strategy for school improvement, it is a necessity. Research demonstrated “a clear and strong relationship between collective efficacy and the extent of teacher leadership in a school” (Derrington & Angelle, 2013, p. 6).

Research also showed higher levels of collective efficacy in schools where teachers were afforded decision-making influence on relevant issues (Goddard, 2002). When teacher’s voices count in regard to designing curriculum, assessment, and professional learning, efficacy increases. Goddard et al. (2004) noted that “where teachers have the opportunity to influence important decisions, they also tend to have stronger beliefs in the conjoint capability of their faculty” (p. 10). By affording teachers greater autonomy and increased power to make decisions on issues related to school improvement, efficacy beliefs can be fostered.

#3. Build Awareness That Collective Efficacy Exists and that it is the Number One Factor that Influences Student Achievement

Talk about collective efficacy. Help others understand what it is and what it means in relation to student achievement. Initiate conversations about the power of beliefs and share relevant research about the impact of collective efficacy.

Design professional learning opportunities that tap into the sources of efficacy. Bandura (1997) proposed four sources that shape an individual's efficacy beliefs. Goddard et al. (2004) noted that the same sources are important to the development of collective efficacy. Mastery experiences are the most powerful of the four sources which also include vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and affective states. Ross and Bruce (2007) designed a professional development program that explicitly addressed the four sources of teacher efficacy, intentionally including opportunities for teacher to engage in mastery and vicarious experiences. The researchers found that the program had "a positive effect on teacher expectations about their ability to handle student-management issues" (p. 58).

One final suggestion to build awareness is to administer self-report efficacy questionnaires. Using the old cliché – '*what gets measured – gets done*' school leaders might consider accessing an instrument to measure collective efficacy and share the results with staff over time.

In conclusion, Horton and Martin (2013) noted that when district leaders take a participatory approach to professional learning and develop teachers by sharing leadership and providing for collaborative structures, their involvement can aid in the development of a collective efficacy. Fostering collective efficacy is a timely and important issue if we are going to realize success for all students.

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