

# The Essential Guide to Professional Learning: Collaboration

The Essential Guide series unpacks the research behind key themes of *The Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders* and *The Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework*. The Essential Guide series provides insights and practical strategies to help teachers and school leaders engage in effective professional growth.

This Essential Guide explores the importance of collaborative professional learning as well as the role of the school leader in supporting a collaborative learning culture.

The questions below are intended as a guide to assist you in ensuring your school's collaborative professional learning has a clear purpose, is supportive of and supported by all staff, and provides learning that is translated to improvements in classroom practice, so that student learning is maximised.

## You will know your school's professional learning culture is collaborative when:

- teachers engage in frequent, ongoing formal and informal conversations about pedagogy and teaching practice ([Australian Professional Standards for Teachers](#))
- teachers work together to research, plan and design effective teaching strategies and programs
- teachers engage in professional dialogue to evaluate and modify teaching strategies and programs
- teachers engage in regular classroom observation and feedback and can articulate how changes in their practice impact on student outcomes
- there is collective ownership of learning goals and outcomes, for both the individual and whole-school
- teachers undertake leadership roles that include initiating and leading professional discussions with colleagues to evaluate practice (Australian Professional Standards for Teachers)
- collaboration is prioritised and sufficient time is given to investing in the practice

### What support is provided to teachers to facilitate collaboration?

- What structures are in place to facilitate regular, meaningful collaboration (for example, meeting times, timetabling)?
- What professional learning on engaging in collaboration strategies is available to teachers?
- How are teachers acknowledged for their collaborative efforts?
- How do school leaders minimise factors that can disrupt collaborative learning?

### How is an effective culture of collaboration developed and maintained?

- How are teachers involved in planning and implementing collaborative learning?
- How is trust generated and supported between teachers as peers and between teachers and school leaders?
- Who decides the focus and structure of collaborative activities?
- How are staff (especially new staff) acquainted with the school's collaborative approach and expectations?

### Is collaboration driven by clear and measurable goals for improvement?

- What data sources are used to determine the focus of collaborative activities?
- What role does the school leader play in ensuring collaboration remains manageable and relevant?
- How are the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers used to help identify the focus of collaborative activities?
- What are the indicators of success in the short, medium or long term?

### How are learnings translated to classroom practice?

- How are strategies identified through collaborative activities implemented in classrooms?
- How will evidence of change be demonstrated?
- How will learnings from collaborative activities be shared with other teachers?
- What structures are in place to support regular classroom observation and feedback so that teachers can reflect on their practice?



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*The more one educator's learning is shared and supported by others, the more quickly the culture of continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and high expectations for students and educators grows (Killion, 2012)*

## What is collaboration?

At its best, collaboration creates a community working to achieve a common goal through the sharing of practice, knowledge and problems. Effective collaboration encourages ongoing observation and feedback among colleagues where a culture of professional sharing, dialogue, experimentation and critique becomes commonplace.

Collaboration can encompass a range of activities, from teachers working together in an informal, unplanned way to the implementation of more formal collaborative approaches, such as professional learning communities (PLCs). Effective collaboration is frequent and ongoing and, when most successful, an integral part of daily routines.

Schools that effectively collaborate "create a base of pedagogical knowledge that is distributed among teachers within a school as opposed to being held by individual teachers" (Brook et al 2007).

## The benefits of collaboration

Collaborating on all aspects of teaching including planning, decision making and problem solving leads to a shared collective responsibility for the outcomes (Killion, 2012). The focus shifts from individual learning goals to contributing to the learning and knowledge base of colleagues and the school (Cole, 2012).

Opportunities to learn from colleagues arise as knowledge and expertise is shared and multiple solutions to problems are generated (the Standards, p.9). Collaboration promotes change beyond individual classrooms, resulting in whole-school improvement; when educators increase their expertise by learning together, all students benefit.

In addition to impact on teacher and student learning, collaboration recognises the crucial role teachers have in school improvement. For this reason, collaboration is regarded as a rewarding professional learning experience (TALIS, 2013).

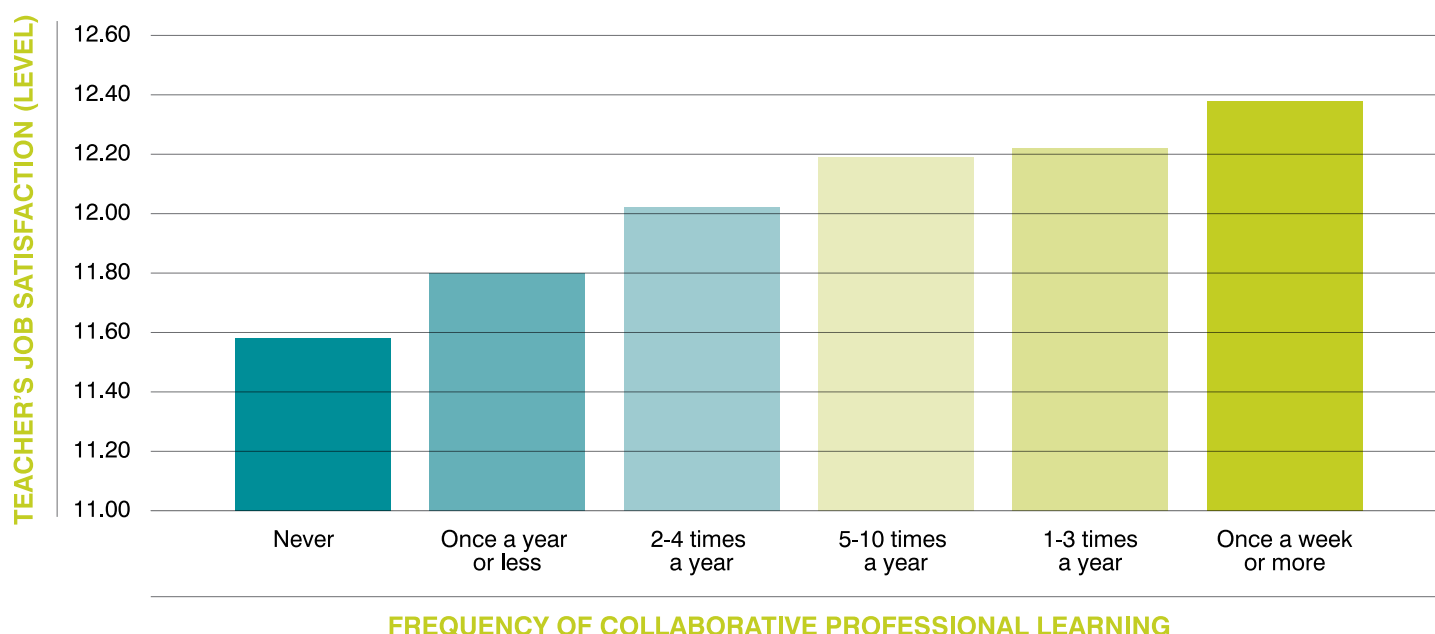
## Collaboration vs Cooperation



# The Essential Guide to Professional Learning: Collaboration

## See what your fellow teachers had to say in a recent OECD report

The 2013 Teaching and Learning International Survey shows that teachers who frequently participate in collaborative professional learning report higher levels of job satisfaction.



Note: The teacher job satisfaction scale in the 2013 OECD TALIS report is derived from responses to questions related to 'satisfaction with the current work environment' and 'satisfaction with the profession'. For more detail, see the [full report](#)

## Purposeful collaboration

*To be most effective, collaborative learning should be driven by analysis of student data and focused upon the development of teachers' knowledge, skills and understanding. (Harris and Jones, 2012)*

As identified in the Standards, teachers should use a range of sources, including student results, to evaluate their teaching and adjust their practice to better meet student needs (Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, p.6). When teachers work together in collaborative teams to gather evidence of student learning, analyse that evidence and identify and deploy the most powerful teaching strategies to address gaps in student learning, the subsequent impact can be significant.

Collaborative work should have a clear focus. This focus should be specific, measurable, simple, informed by data, easy to communicate and linked to teacher and student improvement. It should also be relevant, address an issue that teachers can do something about and be manageable.

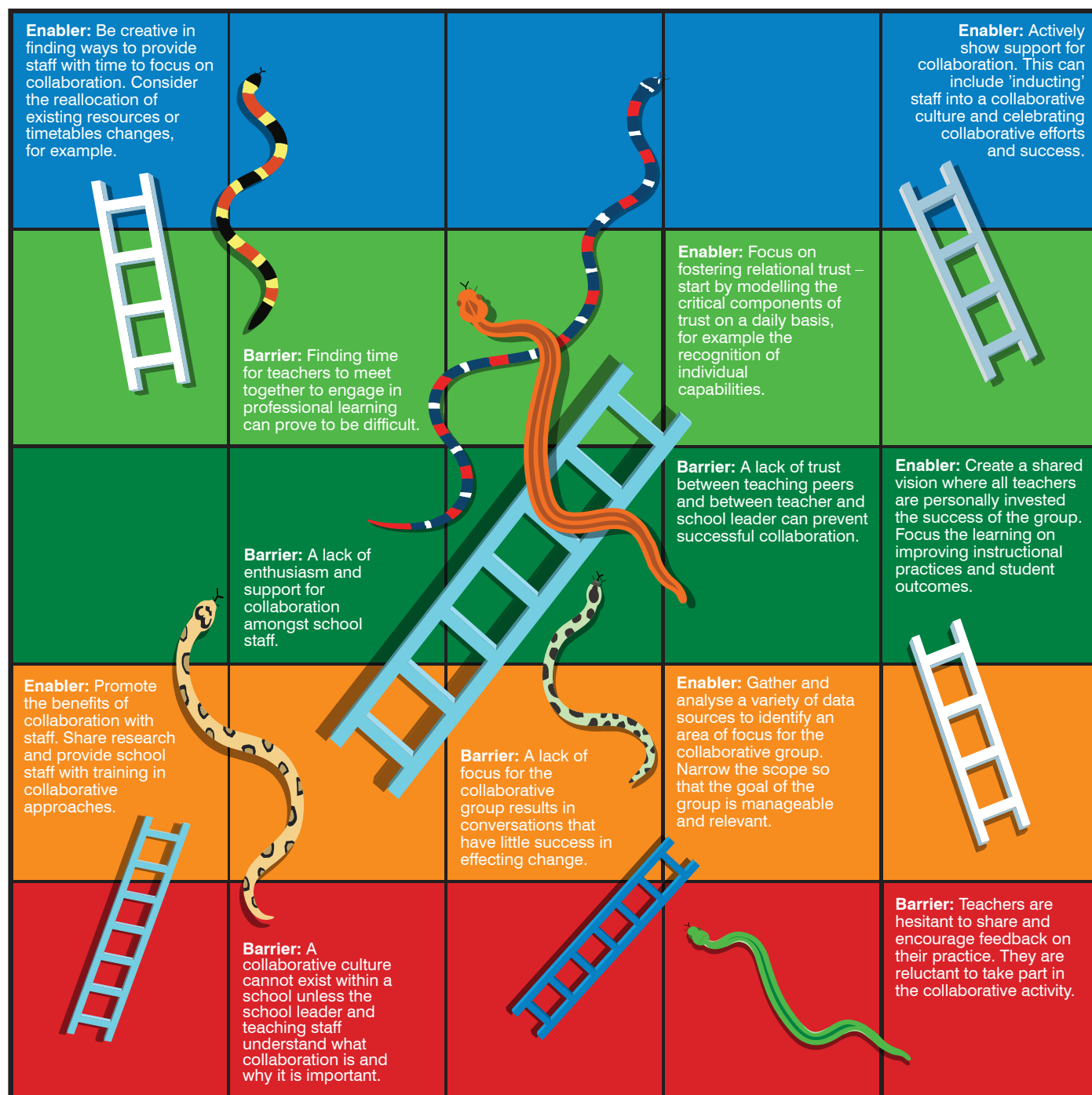
A shared vision can be supported through setting goals as a collaborative group. People are more willing to collaborate on work that has a significant personal meaning for them so creating a shared vision of the outcome is important. Goals should be specific and measurable. Words like "success" and "better" are subjective and can be interpreted differently which can make it difficult for people to understand how they can contribute effectively to those goals.

Collaborative discussion should focus on actions related to the identified goal(s). The most effective professional development emphasises active learning, observation, and reflection rather than abstract discussions.

Analysing student work together gives teachers opportunities to develop a common understanding of what good work is and what instructional strategies are working. Change will occur as teachers learn to describe, discuss, and adjust their practices according to a collectively held standard of teaching quality (Darling-Hammond and Richardson, 2009).

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## Barriers and enablers to collaboration





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## The role of the school leader

The school leader plays an instrumental role in creating and maintaining a collaborative professional learning culture, as described in the Australian Professional Standard for Principals (the Standard).

### Changing the culture

School leaders need to be responsive to the complex, challenging and changing environment and the diverse nature of their school context (the Standard, p.3). A school's culture is characterised by deeply rooted traditions, values, and beliefs, many of which are unique and embedded in a particular school's history and location. For that reason, it is important to understand that culture change is a process, not a journey. It should be ongoing rather than a short term 'win'. Culture change has been described as an 'adaptive challenge' and as such, can only be addressed through changes in people's priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties (Ministry of Education Ontario, 2010).

Trust is an important element of the process, and effective school leaders work to build trust and a positive learning atmosphere for staff. Through their words and actions they set the tone and lay the foundation for collaboration.

It is important for school leaders to share the impetus and research behind any culture change – the first question most people will ask when change is suggested is, why? If the answer is clear then enthusiasm for change will be stronger.

### Distributed leadership

Distributed leadership is crucial to creating and maintaining a collaborative school culture. When culture change initiatives are undertaken, no one person has all the knowledge and skills required to provide leadership for every aspect of the change. By distributing leadership, the school leader is able to draw on the knowledge and skills of staff members to support change. Distributed leadership can lead to increased teacher trust and buy-in for any change initiative, which is essential for fostering a collaborative culture that improves student outcomes.

In a collaborative culture, school leaders help to establish clarity of purpose and empower others to share in the decision making process, so that teams may engage in collaborative work that leads to effective and innovative problem-solving activities

### Practical steps school leaders can take to build relational trust include:

- acknowledging the interdependence – and therefore vulnerability – of members of the school community, and the importance of trust in building commitment and cohesiveness
- modelling the four critical components of trust on a daily basis: respect for others, personal regard for others, competence in role, and personal integrity
- following through on expectations for school staff, including the difficult task of confronting issues involving both behaviour and performance
- demonstrating integrity by “walking the talk”

*(Ministry of Education Ontario, 2010)*

### Practical steps school leaders can take to actively support collaboration include:

- modelling collaboration when working with colleagues, be open to feedback and share decision making responsibilities.
- acknowledging the efforts of school staff who collaborate.
- providing professional learning for school staff in using collaborative strategies. Ensuring that the most effective collaboration is taking place by educating staff.
- making the time for collaboration to occur; examine and adjust classroom timetables, change meeting times or purposes or change the allocation of professional learning resources.

# The Essential Guide to Professional Learning: Collaboration

## Common approaches to collaboration

Collaboration can encompass a range of activities and strategies and can occur without formal or structured strategies being used. If your school doesn't have a collaborative culture, or you would like to try something different, you might want to consider the use of a structured strategy to start.

Below are a few common strategies based in collaborative practices. Most of these strategies involve teachers observing each other's practice, and all involve collaborating in order to learn from each other to improve impact.

### Professional Learning Communities

Professional Learning Communities involve ongoing, job-embedded learning, featuring a group of leaders/teachers who collaborate regularly with a focus on achieving continual school improvement. The group come together to share and critically interrogate their practice, and together, learn and apply new and better approaches to enhance student learning.

### Instructional Rounds

Instructional Rounds involve a collaborative group of leaders/teachers visiting multiple classrooms at one school to gather data on a 'problem of practice'. The group works together to identify patterns and build a picture of teaching and learning across the school, leading to recommendations for improvement.

### Learning Walks

Learning Walks consist of a group of teachers, and perhaps school leaders, visiting multiple classrooms. Together, the group identifies a relevant teaching and learning focus, and gathers evidence related to this focus from across the school. Observers build a whole school picture of practice in the identified focus area while also developing insights into their own professional practice.

### Peer observation

Peer observation involves teachers observing each other's practice and learning from each other. Teachers have the opportunity to give and receive feedback about teaching practice and develop awareness about their own teaching.

### Instructional Coaching

Instructional Coaching comprises a collaborative partnership supporting teachers' goal-setting, using research-informed teaching practices. The coach focusses on supporting the professional growth of individual teachers through modelling practice, classroom observation and reflection, joint problem-solving, and conversations about teaching practice.

## A Case Study of Collaboration in Action

Glen Dhu Primary School, a government school in Tasmania, was experiencing issues with student spelling. Their data showed inconsistent results; as the school's senior leadership put it "there was no rhyme nor reason for why we were having the results we were having, there were no patterns to what was happening". The leadership team realised that if this whole-school problem was going to be solved, they needed a whole-school approach.

Teachers had always worked well together at Glen Dhu, but often more 'cooperatively' than 'collaboratively'. By using an inquiry-based model and giving all teachers a common problem to focus on, the leadership team hoped to create a more collaborative environment.

The first step in the collaborative journey saw the teachers sharing their professional beliefs about teaching spelling – what worked and what didn't work so well. The school also undertook an audit of current practice to see what strategies teachers were using.

The findings of the audit and discussions led them to the decision to explicitly teach five spelling strategies. All five strategies had an emphasis on students being able to identify, articulate and apply the spelling strategies being used in class. All the teachers worked together to develop a

common language about spelling, that could be used by all grade levels.

In grade level teams, Learning Walks were used to ensure the new strategies were having an impact on students, and to routinely collect evidence of how the school-wide spelling strategies were being taught in all classrooms. Post Learning Walk conversations directly informed changes in classroom practice, and supported continued collaborative problem solving. Teachers, school-wide, now had evidence that their collaboration was working.

Glen Dhu's mission to improve student spelling was a successful one. The focus and rigour they applied to collaborating made all the difference. Results from the Single Word Spelling Test that was administered to all students annually, showed significant progress in certain year groups, compared with the same test administered the prior year. Students also showed an increased independence in their writing.

As well as improved student outcomes, there was evidence of a positive impact on teachers as they identified and reported changes in practice that have directly affected their own, and their students learning outcomes.

### Online collaboration

Collaboration doesn't have to take place face-to-face. With the advent of interactive Web 2.0 technology, meaningful online connections can support teachers to collaborate, stay inspired and feel supported. They can provide teachers with increased access to best practices, new ideas, and more resources than ever before.

An online collaborative environment can support teacher discussion and inquiry. Teachers look for global communities that align with their interests, respond to their learning needs, aid in collaborative problem solving, help in sharing ideas and strategies, and facilitate collective action and inquiry.

There are four qualities of online participation that differ from experiences in face-to-face communities:

1. Persistence (i.e. groups can have an infinite shelf-life)
2. Searchability (i.e. we can search for groups aligned to our interests and needs)
3. Replicability (i.e. we can easily edit, change, or re-post others' work)
4. Invisible Audience (i.e. anyone could be reading our work at any time)

(Coughlin and Kajder, 2009)

# The Essential Guide to Professional Learning: Collaboration

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