Best Practices/Tom W. Many, Ed.D.

“Time with colleagues spent in focused inquiry about teaching and learning is a necessity, not a luxury.” David Allen

It’s Not Pixie Dust, It’s Protocol

Improving schools requires a high level of collaboration. Principals know that finding time for collaboration can be challenging, but ensuring that the time is used effectively can be just as daunting.

Principal often ask, “Why is it that some teams use time so much more productively than others?” Some may think it is magic or luck or a sprinkling of pixie dust that enables some teams to use time more effectively than others. In truth, it isn’t pixie dust at all, but the thoughtful—even artful—use of carefully implemented and skillfully facilitated protocols that help a team use time productively.

Professional communities of practice inevitably need learning that only its members can supply.

-Joseph P. McDonald

The effective use of protocols helps ensure that conversations among teachers are productive. Why are protocols and productivity so closely connected? Stevi Quate, co-director of the Colorado Critical Friends Group, defines a protocol simply as a set of “agreed-upon guidelines for a conversation.” But a protocol is more than that.

Most protocols consist of a structured format that includes a tentative time frame and specific guidelines for communication among team members. Descriptions of protocols typically identify the purpose, number of participants, time required, roles of team members, and expected outcomes.

Quate differentiates a protocol from a norm—which consists of agreed-upon guidelines for behavior within a team—and describes a protocol as “a structure which everyone understands, and has agreed to, that permits a certain kind of conversation to occur.” The kinds of conversations Quate is referring to are necessary if principals expect teachers to engage successfully in the analysis of assessment data or the improvement of a lesson.

What purposes do protocols serve? There are protocols designed to promote the examination of student work or to reflect on a teacher’s pedagogy. Some protocols facilitate the analysis of data while others focus on the examination of a lesson. There are protocols that generate suggestions for setting goals with students. Other protocols analyze the relationship between lessons, standards, and rubrics or enable teachers to collect data, make comparisons, and track student progress. Still others delve deeply into the quality of a teacher’s pedagogy and identify strategies for improving an assignment, project or assessment.

Although there are literally dozens of protocols—and many are variations on the same theme—Quate notes that, in its purest form, “a protocol creates the structure that makes it safe for teachers to ask challenging questions of each other.”

We must pause periodically in our practice to become deliberate students of our students.

-Joseph P. McDonald

McDonald and his colleagues have studied the use of protocols in schools, and he agrees with Quate and argues that using protocols promotes development of cultures in which teachers are “able, willing, and even eager—in consultation with their colleagues—to make changes as needed in order to make their work more effective.”

When teachers meet to talk about student learning, they sharpen their pedagogy and deepen their content knowledge. According to the National Turning Points Center (NTPC), teachers who use protocols have a more complete and comprehensive understanding of
what students know and are able to do. The regular use of protocols also helps teachers develop a shared language for assessing student work and a common understanding of what quality student work looks like.

Using protocols creates a culture of continuous learning. David Allen says, “The process of looking at student work in a collaborative manner helps teachers take a closer look at how they teach.” NTPC believes protocols “promote collegial feedback and the critical analysis of student and teacher work in a safe and structured format.” McDonald echoes that belief and recommends using protocols because they foster cultures that “collaboratively assess the quality and rigor of teacher work.”

Using protocols also builds a sense of community among and between teachers. NTPC argues that looking collaboratively at student work and participating in collective problem solving through the use of protocols moves teachers away from the isolating concept of “my students” and toward the community concept of “our students.”

Finally, protocols allow teacher teams to be more efficient. Quate reminds us that, in most schools, time is the resource that no one seems to have enough of. Once mastered, protocols become a valuable tool teachers use to focus collaborative conversations on what matters and thereby make the most of the time they do have.

**It’s scary work, though, and respectful protocols can help.** -Diane Weaver-Dunne

Principals should expect some dubious responses as teams begin to use protocols. Indeed, the NTPC warns, “When teachers first begin using protocols as a way of looking at students’ work, assignments, and assessment results, the process may feel formal or stiff.” NTPC continues, “And because teachers are not accustomed to sharing work publicly with peers, the process can also feel intimidating at first.” McDonald agrees, noting, “When teachers are looking at student work—particularly looking together at student work—it can be threatening. This is why protocols are useful.”

Initially, many teachers feel protocols are a waste of time, but effective principals encourage teachers to try them anyway. “Schools mired in norms of private practice and used to ignoring the actual impact of the practice on student learning may not take easily to learning with protocols,” McDonald observed. However, he found that, “when pressed to see them all the way through, even reluctant participants find something refreshing about protocols.”

Like most changes, as teachers gain experience with using protocols, their confidence and comfort levels increase, as do the realized benefits of using protocols. Principals need to have confidence that the use of protocols will make teacher teams more productive and convey that confidence consistently as teachers become accustomed to working in the structured format that protocols provide.

Further, teachers must recognize that a protocol is a means to an end—not an end in itself. “The point is not to do the protocol well, but to have an in-depth, insightful conversation about teaching and learning,” Quate cautions.

“Protocols are no panacea,” McDonald reminds us, but a resourceful principal realizes protocols can be powerful tools to help structure a team’s collaborative conversations.

Protocols—not pixie dust—promote productivity

Why are some teams more productive? In the end, it is the regular and intentional use of protocols that helps teachers make their team time more productive. These agreed-upon guidelines help to frame conversations that focus on teaching and learning and foster a supportive culture characterized by a commitment to continuous learning. This is good news for teachers and principals because, more enduring and practical than a sprinkling of elusive pixie dust, the use of protocols promotes positive and lasting results for teacher teams.

During the course of a career spanning more than 30 years, Dr. Tom W. Many has served as a classroom teacher, principal and superintendent—all at the elementary level.

Email questions and comments to feedback@tepsa.org.

**References**


