

Introduction

If you learned there was an intervention to improve student outcomes that worked for nearly all children across communities, what would stop you from using it? This intervention has closed learning gaps both in urban communities serving predominantly low-income minority students and in isolated rural areas with large numbers of white and Native American students living in poverty. It has worked in suburban, urban, and rural settings with white, African American, Hispanic, Native American, Asian, and multiracial students. That intervention is *collaboration*.

There is no doubt that collaboration is hard work in education. Stakeholders with diverse interests, backgrounds, and experiences must come together to develop solutions better than what they would have come up with working alone. While there is a growing body of research and resources on how to work together more effectively to improve student learning, educators often have a hard time finding relevant and accessible support. We have compiled this Guide on labor-management-community collaboration to bring disparate research and resources on collaboration together in one place for educators, community partners, and policy makers.

Most educational and community leaders know it is essential to collaborate, but do not know where to start. Online searches for resources on collaboration literally yield millions of results. The leader or practitioner motivated to collaborate is stymied by the sheer amount of information.

He or she has little time to sift through documents, watch videos, listen to podcasts, or attend webinars to learn how to get started or to deepen existing collaborative work. After seeing many powerful examples of how collaboration led to transformation in school districts, we decided to undertake this work. Motivated by the potential of collaboration as an effective and universal communitywide intervention, we took the time to collect, analyze, and curate as many resources on collaboration as we could find, including the best scientific research conducted at schools of education and business. The Guide is the collective result of our efforts.

The Guide illustrates tools and best practices using case studies of communities that have engaged in collaboration involving labor, management, and community stakeholders with the goal of accelerating student achievement. These case studies illustrate the challenges of collaboration as well as how stakeholders overcame those challenges using various protocols, processes, and resources. Although collaboration is rarely a linear process, the chapters build on one another. We begin by describing tools to assess readiness to collaborate and to form an effective team with diverse stakeholders. Subsequent chapters focus on the team process itself along with the problems of practice that are ideal for collaborative teams to address.

One of the first challenges of collaboration that we discuss is simply understanding what it means to collaborate. Collaboration so often means different things for different people. Some equate it with compromise, others with slow movement, while still others conceptualize it as the best way to build momentum and ideas that can be put into action. Collaboration also happens at different levels—among classroom teachers in the same school or between leaders across a community. To reap the benefits of what we call labor-management-community collaboration, it must be viewed as a *process through which stakeholders who see parts of a problem differently can explore these differences and construct solutions that are better than what they could have come up with on their own.*¹

Our Guide focuses explicitly on labor-management-community (LMC) collaboration. This model emphasizes a collaborative decision-making

process that includes community leaders and other partners in improving student outcomes. Parents, nonprofit leaders, government agency administrators, and business executives work with school system administrators, school board members, and union leaders on meaningful reforms that positively impact the learning relationship between teachers and students. In the LMC model, the community is an equal partner with labor and management in ensuring that students succeed in school and life. When labor, management, *and* community work together productively, there is tremendous opportunity to reduce redundancy, reallocate resources to more productive efforts, and create an expansive safety net for the most vulnerable students. Of course, broadening the number and diversity of school and district partners is not easy, but it has the effect of engaging a more inclusive team, producing results far greater than the sum of separate efforts.

PUTTING COLLABORATION IN CONTEXT

Collaboration is hard to do and perhaps even harder to study. Until very recently, collaboration was often neglected as a topic of research. Some early work on the private sector looked at performance and innovation when businesses collaborated through joint ventures. These studies focused on the development and formation of joint ventures and their governance structures.² There is also considerable research on the preconditions necessary for high performance in private sector collaborations. Trust, common purpose, appropriate members, and adequate resources have all been identified as essential components.³ In 2009, scholar and collaboration expert Morten T. Hansen wrote what many thought was the essential treatise on the topic in the private sector context. His book *Collaboration: How Leaders Avoid the Traps, Create Unity, and Reap Big Results* details successful examples of collaboration in the private sector and what managers could do to lead successful collaborative work.⁴ While there is a solid body of research on private sector collaboration, the results from studies on collaboration in the public sector are just beginning to emerge.

For example, there is growing evidence demonstrating how effective collaboration between labor, management, and community stakeholders can lead to improved student learning. A group of early studies explored the factors that led to effective collaboration and hypothesized that productive labor-management relationships were a prerequisite to accelerated achievement.⁵ Adam Urbanski, president of the Rochester Teachers Association and cofounder of the Teacher Union Reform Network (TURN), made a compelling case that any reform aimed at improving outcomes in teaching and learning must rely on teacher engagement and ownership. He wrote that without collaboration between administrators and the teacher unions, even the “best efforts of management are tantamount to one hand clapping.”⁶

Subsequent research and reports attempted to quantify the effect of collaboration on student learning. Yet scholars’ attempts to pinpoint the impact of labor-management relationships on learning have been thwarted by the complexity and diversity of policies and practices across states and districts.⁷ In addition, there was a paucity of research on the topic, and results were mixed and inconclusive.⁸ The only takeaway from these early studies was that labor-management collaboration seemed to matter, but no one was really sure how.

Notably, one report from the NEA Foundation published in 2007 attempted to show how districts could use labor-management collaboration to improve equity and reduce the achievement gap.⁹ The authors tried to draw the link between enhanced collaboration and improved outcomes in Clark County School District in Nevada and Hamilton County, Tennessee. The report drew heavily from the concepts on “win-win” bargaining outlined in Kaboolian and Sutherland’s 2005 work on building collaborative district-union relationships.¹⁰

Soon after the financial crisis hit in 2007–2008, stresses over how to spend depleted resources led to old fights between labor and management in an effort to control costs. The debate was often framed in zero-sum terms. Teachers could either absorb the cuts through reduced pay or job

losses, or management could reduce central office staff and redirect funds to teachers. But at the same time, a third way emerged that began to recognize the importance of shared responsibility for shaping policy and making hard choices.

New research began to unpack the mechanisms of labor-management relationships and their effects on teacher capacity and student learning. In 2011, the US Department of Education compiled evidence of a positive impact on student achievement from twelve school districts in its *Local Labor-Management Relationships as a Vehicle to Advance Reform*. They found that districts with strong labor-management partnerships—Baltimore City Schools, Denver Public Schools, Hillsborough County Public Schools, and Montgomery County Public Schools, for example—were able to improve student achievement by collaborating on teacher evaluation, compensation, and career development systems.¹¹ Montgomery County saw double-digit closure in the gap between black and Hispanic students and their white counterparts in nearly every grade level in reading and math achievement. While multiple initiatives contributed to these improvements, many attributed that performance jump to productive labor-management collaboration.¹²

Similarly, McCarthy and Rubenstein analyzed the labor-management relationships in a cross section of urban and rural, large and small districts to better understand how to enhance planning, decision making, and problem solving in districts and schools. Their two studies, published in 2011 and 2014, included thirty schools in California serving 1,100 students (46% free and reduced lunch) and found that higher-quality partnerships between management and labor, as well as more frequent and extensive communication, led to improved student performance. The authors show how labor-management collaboration in these districts was created and sustained to improve overall teacher quality and accelerate student achievement.¹³

Drawing from examples in Cincinnati, Ohio, and Union City, New Jersey, Anrig (2013) explained how teachers and administrators codesigned curricula, professional development, and evaluation systems to improve student

performance. The results in Union City have been remarkable. In a district with nearly 11,000 students—96 percent Hispanic and 85 percent low-income—language arts and math proficiency nearly matched or outperformed statewide averages in 2013. Compared to Hispanic and low-income students in New Jersey, Union City children had double-digit leads in academic proficiency.¹⁴

The reports were complemented by how-to guides and frameworks for district and union leaders.¹⁵ *Working Better Together* was published as a comprehensive manual for leaders in the public sector to build more effective relationships with employee groups.¹⁶ The US Department of Education developed its own conceptual framework and principles for building productive district-union collaboration.¹⁷ Some states, such as Massachusetts, put forth their own efforts in advocating for enhanced labor-management relationships.¹⁸

Despite their demonstrated success, the number of meaningful partnerships in the country is modest, and most only involve labor and management. And this is not because collaboration is unnecessary. Quite the contrary, collaboration is critical for solving complex social problems—poverty, gun violence, abuse, and educational inequality. Some research studies suggest that humans may even be predisposed to collaboration.¹⁹ These and other social struggles cut across organizational, political, geographical, and ideological boundaries.²⁰ Indeed, in our experience working with communities in Massachusetts and elsewhere, we have found that enduring solutions can only be devised when labor, management, and community stakeholders work together.

Kania and Kramer lay out the characteristics of deep communitywide collaboration, which they call “collective impact.”²¹ This type of collaboration is defined by long-term commitments by a group of important actors from different sectors—teacher unions, school districts, businesses, and community organizations—to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem. We were motivated to write this book with the goal of increasing and

expanding deep collective-impact LMC collaborations. We will not make significant progress addressing educational inequality in our communities until all stakeholders are working together productively.

Of course, the criticisms and questions about the tradeoffs of LMC collaboration must also be acknowledged. For example, Moe (2006, 2011) has written extensively about the disproportionate amount of influence teacher unions have on politics and educational policy in the United States.²² In addition, Brill (2012) has raised awareness about dysfunctional teacher dismissal policies that he attributes to the self-interests of teacher unions.²³ More importantly, there are practitioners on the ground who are skeptical that the benefits of collaboration outweigh its costs. Some superintendents and principals may think collaboration erodes their authority and capacity to lead. Teacher union leaders might believe collaboration means capitulation or “selling out.” Ordinary teachers may feel overwhelmed, undervalued, and frustrated, and may be unsure the investment in collaboration will change anything. It is important to keep these concerns and practitioners in mind when moving toward LMC collaboration. However, in this Guide we emphasize collaboration as a decision-making process involving labor, management, and community stakeholders as equal partners.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Given the stubborn achievement gaps still in evidence across the country, the potential of and need for collaboration is tremendous. The challenge for leaders and practitioners is how to best stimulate effective collaborative action. Different organizational goals, cultures, procedures, and languages create barriers to success.²⁴ Furthermore, intentionally integrating community stakeholders in reform efforts increases the complexity. Although district managers and union labor leaders have different roles, they do work in the same system. Daily or weekly contact often occurs in carrying out everyday duties, making collaboration much easier. Community

members—parents, nonprofit representatives, business leaders, and others—must not only put in extra efforts to learn what is going on, but must also take time off work and away from their family to do so.

Unfortunately, practical and accessible resources on how to overcome these barriers and collaborate effectively are hard to find. Teachers, administrators, and community partners are often unaware of the rising tide of research and reports on labor-management collaboration. And even those who know of the research often struggle to make sense of it at a more practical level.

This Guide walks educational and community leaders and practitioners through a step-by-step process of getting collaboration started in their communities, or of expanding and deepening existing efforts. The early chapters are designed primarily for communities just beginning on the road of LMC collaboration; those well on their way with collaborative efforts can use the first part of the book to refine and strengthen their work. Resources and examples in these chapters focus on understanding the end goal (chapter 1), identifying the starting point with a needs assessment (chapter 2), and ascertaining best practices for forming a diverse multi-stakeholder team (chapter 3). Later chapters address developing effective team processes (chapter 4), selecting a meaningful problem centered on improving student learning (chapter 5), and knowing what to do when things go wrong, particularly after an agreed-upon solution begins to be implemented (chapter 6). The districts and communities featured show a particular tool, process, or concept in action. Our goal is to make LMC collaboration as real and tangible as possible by showing examples of how it works in real-life situations.

In chapter 1 we start first with a basic understanding of collaboration and what it means to partner on meaningful reform with a broad group of community stakeholders. This sets the foundation for applying processes and tools to reach the end goal of effective collaboration, *when stakeholders construct solutions that are better than what they could have come up with on their own*. Chapter 1 describes Baltimore's route to a new teacher evaluation system to illustrate collaboration between schools, unions, and

community members. Baltimore's collaboration illustrates the features of a robust, collective-impact collaboration because it engages a broad coalition of stakeholders to address critical aspects of student learning, such as teacher compensation and professional development.

Once you have an understanding of effective LMC collaboration, it is critical to then assess readiness to collaborate. Chapter 2 illustrates tools and resources to do just that, using case studies on communities in Springfield, Massachusetts, and La Grange, Illinois. A comprehensive and transparent needs assessment lays the foundation for collaboration by identifying stakeholders' differing views on major issues. Those involved in the collaboration can then begin reconciling how their perspectives align or diverge. This process is critical to arriving at specific strategies that people doing the work feel engaged with and are willing to implement.

Once stakeholders understand their differing perspectives and readiness to collaborate, it is time to form the team (if one doesn't already exist). Chapter 3 provides best practices on forming and facilitating LMC collaborative teams by highlighting work in Fall River, Massachusetts. In this chapter we emphasize that team recruitment must be thoughtful, intentional, and attentive to the identified problems. Given that most teams will be responsible for bringing an improvement project from design to implementation, it is important, during team formation, that considerable attention be given to including those individuals who will be responsible for sustaining the work, including community members, principals, and teachers. Although taking time to understand the working styles and skill sets of each team member can seem like a distraction, evidence suggests that teams that slow down, cultivate good norms, and build a sense of trust and understanding prior to commencing the work lay a more solid foundation for collaboration.

Chapter 4 focuses on strengthening and sustaining an effective process for collaboration once the team has been formed. There is a saying that "process trumps strategy." The reason for this is that the environment is always changing, and strategies must respond to those changes. Process is

critical to responding and recrafting an effective strategy in a timely manner. We advocate for taking a problem-solving approach that uses the features of interests-based bargaining. In chapter 4 we provide tools and resources on how to use an interests-based process (IBP) to maximize outcomes by prioritizing relationships and promoting structures meant to build and expand trust.²⁵ Facilitators (either internal or external) are key structural elements and are there to encourage participation in problem solving among all team members. IBP emphasizes transparent information sharing, jointly chaired committees, and the identification of shared interests.

The hallmark of any successful collaboration is that the stakeholders are working on a problem that is specific, meaningful, and connected to student learning. Chapter 5 illustrates how the needs assessment (chapter 2), team (chapter 3), and process (chapter 4) come together to identify a specific problem that is critical to improving student outcomes. Using a case study of the school system and community in Revere, Massachusetts, we show how a well-defined and important topic not only motivates people to engage in collaborative work, but also helps team members get through difficult times. Working on meaningful reforms also brings in a wider and more diverse group of stakeholders. The challenge is identifying an issue that is important, connected to learning, and within the locus of control of stakeholders.

Collaboration rarely goes as planned. In chapter 6 we address what to do when collaboration goes wrong (which it will) in implementing agreed-upon solutions. Leaders come and go, elections produce unexpected results, and external shocks, such as budget cuts, introduce new tensions. Such disruptions can undermine and even lead to the suspension of collaborative activities. It is critical in any collaborative process that participants expect challenges and do not give up when they occur. To get through difficult times, stakeholders must understand that implementation occurs in stages and is a continuous process. It requires teams to establish clear ground rules for communication, procedures for individuals to join and leave collaborative projects, and formalized structures, such as joint labor-management

committees, that extend shared decision-making processes beyond personal relationships.

Throughout the book, in end-of-chapter appendixes, we provide a number of practical tools and resources to engage in collaborative decision making. However, our Guide is not exhaustive. There may be some resources not covered that stakeholders find helpful. Moreover, we do not expect users of the Guide to find every resource valuable. The Guide might be viewed more as a menu than a recipe. There are plenty of options to choose from to help enhance or initiate collaboration. The big challenge is moving from collaborating on specific issues or topics to developing a system of continuous improvement grounded in a collaborative culture.

NO CHOICE BUT TO COLLABORATE

It is no longer a choice whether to collaborate. In an increasingly globalized and service-based economy, collaboration is growing and will continue to do so. Organizations in our knowledge-based economy tend to thrive, or fail, on their ability to work in teams, learn, and innovate. Those who succeed cultivate a diversity of perspectives, engaging committed professionals in a process of continuous improvement to achieve shared goals.²⁶ In education, the effectiveness of any recent reform, such as Common Core, teacher evaluation, and new school-choice models, is inextricably tied to the ability of school board members, superintendents, principals, teachers, the union, and community leaders to work together. Our goal is that this Guide will make the experience of working with others more effective, and help collaboration reach its full potential as a cross-setting policy intervention.