

ISSUE BRIEF

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BUILDING COLLECTIVE EFFICACY How Leaders Inspire Teachers to Achieve

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In 2001, John R. Tibbott Elementary School in Bolingbrook, Illinois, faced a roadblock on its path to improved student learning. Despite several positive signs that the school was moving in the right direction, Tibbott was one of the lowest performing schools in the district, with only 57 percent of its students meeting or exceeding expectations on the state test.¹

Four years earlier the principal, Ed Carli, had organized his faculty into “cadres” with a leader-teacher of each cadre serving on the School Leadership Team (SLT). According to teachers and staff members, this organizational change improved communication and fostered shared decision making among teachers and school leaders. Despite improvements in student behavior and school climate, however, student performance continued to lag.

At this point, the SLT and the faculty decided to try a new approach. Principal Carli took the SLT on an intense two-day “data retreat” during which teachers learned to analyze student performance information in order to improve their ability to make data-driven instructional decisions. Tibbott’s SLT members then taught these skills to every faculty member at the school.

The results have been impressive. Despite steady annual increases in the number of low-income students and English language learners, Tibbott Elementary has made adequate yearly progress (AYP) every year since 2002 and 70 percent of its students now meet or exceed standards in all subjects on the state assessment tests.²

What accounts for these improvements in student achievement? Although multiple factors were clearly at work, one of the underlying causes of this transformation is what researchers refer to as “collective efficacy.” Collective efficacy is the perception of teachers in a school that the efforts of the faculty as a whole will have a positive effect on student learning.³ In the case of Tibbott Elementary, the teachers believed in some fundamental sense that they could, as a group, significantly improve student learning. It is important to note that, although the supportive and warm relationships that developed among the SLT and the cadres appear to have played a vital role in the success of the data retreat intervention, relationships alone were not enough to produce results in student academic performance. Only through focused and ongoing professional development and specific actions on the part of the principal were the teachers of Tibbott Elementary able to dramatically improve student performance.

Collective Efficacy— Its Importance to Education Leaders

In his January 2007 Issue Brief, *Believing and Achieving*, Craig Jerald highlighted how teacher perceptions of individual and collective efficacy indirectly influence student learning.⁴ Jerald notes that research has shown that teachers with strong perceptions of efficacy put more effort into planning lessons, are more open to new ideas, and persevere in the face of new challenges. What is most promising about this line of research, suggests Jerald, is that efficacy perceptions are not set in stone.

Building on Jerald's work, this brief focuses on one vital aspect of efficacy known as "collective teacher efficacy" (CTE). CTE refers to the perceptions of teachers that the efforts of the faculty as a whole will have a positive effect on students.

CTE generally is measured by averaging the responses of a school's individual teachers to a series of questions on a survey. Teachers with stronger perceptions of collective efficacy are more likely to say they agree with statements like "teachers in this school have what it takes to get the children to learn" and "teachers here are well-prepared to teach the subjects they are assigned to teach." Likewise, teachers with strong collective efficacy are more likely to say they disagree with statements such as "students here just aren't motivated to learn" or "teachers in this school think there are some students that no one can reach."⁵

Principals and district leaders should turn their attention to improving CTE because it has an impressive list of positive consequences. Strong collective efficacy:

- improves student performance
- ameliorates the negative effects of low socioeconomic status (SES)
- enhances parent/teacher relationships

- creates a work environment that builds teacher commitment to the school

Improves Student Performance

Research demonstrates that collective teacher efficacy has a strong measurable effect on student performance. In their study of 452 urban elementary teachers in 47 schools, Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk Hoy (2000) found that a one-point increase in a school's collective efficacy score (on a six-point scale) is associated with about an 8.5-point increase in student achievement scores—an increase social scientists would call a moderate effect.⁶ Indeed, they found that even when taking into consideration the effects of student demographics such as race, socioeconomic status, and gender (that is, factors beyond a school's control), perceptions of collective efficacy still were strong predictors of academic performance.⁷

Ameliorates Effects of Low SES

Bandura (1993) noted that the positive effects of CTE on student academic performance more than outweigh the negative effects of low socioeconomic status.⁸ Goddard et al. (2000) confirmed this finding in their study, which demonstrated that between-school differences in collective efficacy had a stronger positive relationship with mathematics and reading achievement than low socioeconomic status had a negative relationship.⁹ This suggests that in schools with otherwise similar demographics, principals who work to build collective teacher efficacy will make greater strides toward closing the achievement gap in their schools.

Enhances Parent/Teacher Relationships

In addition to improving student performance, teachers at schools with strong CTE appear to be more comfortable reaching out to parents. Ross and Gray (2006) suggest that because involving parents exposes teachers to the risk that parents will criticize the school or identify different goals or values than those

identified by the school, schools with low CTE are less likely to engage parents. A staff that is confident in their own abilities and in their effectiveness, on the other hand, is more likely to welcome parental participation because they believe they will be able to withstand these challenges.¹⁰

Builds Teacher Commitment

The strength or weakness of CTE helps or hinders the positive effects of individual efficacy.¹¹ That is, stronger collective efficacy encourages individual teachers to more effectively deploy the skills they already have, find new ways to tackle difficult challenges, and share what they know with others. Research has shown that “groups with higher collective efficacy set more difficult group goals and [are] more committed to those goals.”¹² Collective efficacy, then, is a key to unlocking the existing talents of individual teachers and building their commitment to the school’s success.

Building Collective Efficacy in Schools

There is not a failsafe set of steps that school leaders can take to improve collective efficacy among teachers at any given school. Nevertheless, research does offer some guidance for leaders who want to prioritize their actions to ensure that they are focusing on interventions that have the highest likelihood of increasing collective efficacy. This issue brief will summarize what is known about the actions that principals can take to increase collective efficacy among their faculty.

In a recent study involving 1,981 K–8 teachers, Goddard and Skrla (2006) found that contextual and demographic factors such as a school’s socioeconomic status, the experience level of the faculty, and students’ prior academic performance accounted for less than half (46 percent) of the differences in collective efficacy between schools.¹³ This suggests

that there are several other factors at work in building collective efficacy that principals and district leaders can influence.

Only in the last decade or so have researchers begun to look at specific actions that school or district leaders can take to improve collective efficacy among teachers. This emerging body of research, though still in its early stages, suggests that the following actions on the part of principals can improve collective efficacy:

- Build instructional knowledge and skills.
- Create opportunities for teachers to collaboratively share skills and experience.
- Interpret results and provide actionable feedback on teachers’ performance.
- Involve teachers in school decision making.¹⁴

Build Instructional Knowledge and Skills

In their review of two efforts in Cincinnati and Philadelphia to implement communities of instructional practice in large schools, Supovitz and Christman (2003) found that the link between greater teacher collegiality and improved academic achievement among students was not as direct as initially believed. Interventions designed to improve teamwork and communication among teachers, foster sharing of best practices, and strengthen teacher relationships with students and parents did not necessarily translate into more effective teaching and better student performance. Supovitz and Christman found, however, that the schools that did achieve better results had leaders who provided opportunities for “structured, sustained, and supported instructional discussions” and “investigated the relationships between instructional practices and student work.”¹⁵ In short, when leaders provided frequent, structured opportunities for teachers to focus on instructional practices, teachers translated this new knowledge into more effective teaching.

Create Opportunities for Collaboration

In the Tibbott Elementary case, the School Leadership Team's decision to participate in a data retreat that led to schoolwide data analysis training created ongoing opportunities for the faculty to collaborate around instructional practice. Data retreats can offer a very powerful change tool to principals and teachers because they provide detailed, specific information about poor student performance that enables teachers to develop a targeted approach to improving student achievement.

Site visits offer another potentially powerful opportunity for collaboration. If a principal is attempting to implement a new instructional program with a faculty that has experienced failure in the past, has poor perceptions of collective efficacy, and has little or no prior exposure to highly effective instructional practices, they may benefit greatly from visiting a site where the new program has worked—especially if the model school has faced the same challenges and overcome them.¹⁶

Even less structured collaboration efforts may maintain or improve perceptions of efficacy. In a very small sample of seven teachers who began a voluntary professional study group, Pfaff (2000) found that teachers with already high levels of efficacy maintained those levels during the course of the year, unlike their peers who did not participate in the study group. Many of those who did not participate suffered a significant decrease in efficacy perceptions.¹⁷ This study indicates that principals can support perceptions of efficacy even with limited resources if they can design interventions that are focused on instructional practices and promote increased sharing of skills and experiences between teachers.

Interpret Results and Provide Feedback

According to Lindsley, Brass, and Thomas (1995), one of the most important aspects of a leader's role in improving perceptions of collective efficacy is to help a group interpret

performance results. Rather than simply stating the outcomes, principals need to contextualize the results in three ways:

- Identify specific efforts that resulted in success to build on in future endeavors.
- Explain how the results fit into a communally-shared understanding of what constitutes success.
- Present the outcomes in a manner that develops confidence while tempering trends toward overconfidence and complacency (if the outcome is successful) or defeatism (if the outcome is negative).¹⁸

Leaders who identify the reasons for success when they present positive results and who are able to temper success with the recognition that there will be challenges ahead can inspire their faculty to continue working to improve their practice.¹⁹ High-quality, detailed performance feedback is necessary to build an organization with high collective efficacy that recognizes that it can face the challenges ahead.

Involve Teachers in School Decision Making

Goddard, Hoy, and Woolfolk Hoy (2004) state that, "the more teachers have the opportunity to influence instructionally relevant school decisions, the more likely a school is to be characterized by a robust sense of collective efficacy."²⁰ These researchers further describe various ways that teachers can influence instructionally relevant school decisions, including control over curriculum, instructional materials, and activities; professional development; communication with parents; student placement; and disciplinary policies.

At Tibbott Elementary, Principal Carli built on the successes of the data retreat by taking the School Leadership Team to a leadership institute to build their confidence and leadership skills. By continually fostering a strong group of leader-teachers, Principal Carli ensured that teachers were equipped and

empowered to make effective instructional decisions both in their own classrooms and on a schoolwide level.

Conclusion

Richard Elmore's well-regarded monograph, *Building a New Structure for School Leadership*, argues that the key barrier to successfully and dramatically improving student performance is the fact that too many teachers are isolated and have little opportunity for professional collaboration with colleagues, the principal, or the district.²¹ Building collective teacher efficacy—by providing teachers with opportunities to build instructional knowledge and collaborate with colleagues, with feedback that is insightful and with a vision of success in which teachers are treated as sources of expertise—will allow leaders to transform their schools into organizations with strong collective efficacy and improved student performance. School leaders face many challenges, but helping to ensure that teachers have the instructional skills and the professional confidence they need to teach their students effectively is the most important challenge of all. Focusing on building collective efficacy can provide leaders a means to achieve this goal.

Several people contributed to this issue brief including Sarah Crittenden and Bryan Hassel of Public Impact.

Endnotes

¹ See Appendix A in: Kimmelman, P. L. (2006). *Implementing NCLB: Creating a knowledge framework to support school improvement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

² Student demographics and state test performance metrics were drawn from the Illinois Interactive Report Card: See <http://iirc.niu.edu>. John R. Tibbott Elementary's student population was 22.4 percent Hispanic in 1999 and 61.6 percent Hispanic in 2006. In 1999, 34.9 percent of the student population was from low-income families. In 2006, that percentage had grown to 54.6 percent.

³ Goddard, R. D., Hoy, W. K., & Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2000). Collective teacher efficacy: Its meaning, measure, and impact on student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(2), 479–507.

⁴ Jerald, C. D. (2007). *Believing and achieving*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement.

⁵ These statements were drawn from the collective efficacy measurement instrument employed in Goddard, R. D., Hoy, W. K., & Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2000). Collective teacher efficacy: Its meaning, measure, and impact on student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(2), 479–507.

⁶ Goddard, R. D., Hoy, W. K., & Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2000). Collective teacher efficacy: Its meaning, measure, and impact on student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(2), 479–507.

⁷ After accounting for other factors, CTE explained 53 percent of the difference in mathematics achievement and 69 percent of the remaining difference in reading achievement between schools. See: Goddard, R. D., Hoy, W. K., & Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2000). Collective teacher efficacy: Its meaning, measure, and impact on student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(2), 479–507.

⁸ Bandura, A. (1993). Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning. *Educational Psychologist*, 28(2), 117–148.

⁹ Goddard, R. D., Hoy, W. K., & Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2000). Collective teacher efficacy: Its meaning, measure, and impact on student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(2), 479–507. The collective efficacy coefficient on mathematics achievement was 8.62 and the low socioeconomic status coefficient was -5.49.

¹⁰ Ross, J. A., & Gray, P. (2006). Transformational leadership and teacher commitment to organizational values: The mediating effects of collective teacher efficacy. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 17(2), 179–199. Quote from p. 192.

¹¹ Hoy, W. K., Sweetland, S. R., & Smith, P. A. (2002). Toward an organizational model of achievement in high schools: The significance of collective efficacy. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 38(1), 77–93.

¹² Mulvey, P. W., & Klein, H. J. (1998). The impact of perceived loafing and collective efficacy on group goal processes and group performance. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 74(1), 62–87. Quote from p. 84.

¹³ Goddard, R. D., & Skrla, L. (2006). The influence of school social composition on teachers' collective efficacy beliefs. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 42(2), 216–235.

¹⁴ Ross, J. A., & Gray, P. (2006). Transformational leadership and teacher commitment to organizational values: The mediating effects of collective teacher efficacy. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 17(2), 179–199.

¹⁵ Supovitz, J. A., & Christman, J. B. (2003). *Developing communities of instructional practice: Lessons from Cincinnati and Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education. Quote from p. 5.

¹⁶ Lindsley, D. H., Brass, D. J., & Thomas, J. B. (1995). Efficacy-performance spirals: A multilevel perspective. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 645–678. Lindsley et al. warn that leaders must guide teachers through interpreting how a similar school achieved positive results where they themselves have failed. A leader should counter negative notions through specific identification of steps taken by the model school that led to success and by identifying how the struggling school is capable of taking those steps as well. Preventing the internalization of failure is an important role of a leader seeking to build collective efficacy.

¹⁷ Pfaff, M. E. (2000, April). *The effects on teacher efficacy of school based collaborative activities structured as professional study groups*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.

¹⁸ Lindsley, D. H., Brass, D. J., & Thomas, J. B. (1995). Efficacy-performance spirals: A multilevel perspective. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 645–678. The principal’s role in interpreting success is as vital in high-performing schools as low-performing schools. In high-performing schools, teachers may overestimate their collective efficacy and have greater difficulty when faced with their first significant challenge; Ross, J. A., & Gray, P. (2006) Transformational leadership and teacher commitment to organizational values: The mediating effects of collective teacher efficacy. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 17(2), 179–199.

¹⁹ Lindsley, D. H., Brass, D. J., & Thomas, J. B. (1995). Efficacy-performance spirals: A multilevel perspective. *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), 645–678.

²⁰ Goddard, R. D., Hoy, W. K., & Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2004). Collective efficacy beliefs: Theoretical developments, empirical evidence, and future directions. *Educational Researcher*, 33(3), 3–13. Quote from p. 10.

²¹ Elmore, R. F. (2000). *Building a new structure for school leadership*. Washington, DC: The Albert Shanker Institute. Retrieved October 1, 2007, from <http://www.ashankerinst.org/Downloads/building.pdf>

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This is one in a series of issue briefs to be written for The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement. These commentaries are meant to help readers think beyond simple compliance with federal law or basic implementation of programs: What unacknowledged challenges must educators and leaders confront to help schools operate more effectively and to sustain improvement over the long run? In what ways does the conventional wisdom about teaching, learning, and school improvement run counter to current research and get in the way of making good decisions? What are the emerging next-generation issues that educators will face next year and five years from now? Readers can visit www.centerforsri.org to obtain other papers in this series and to access additional information on school reform and improvement.



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