Effective teachers want to work in schools where leaders create opportunities for collaboration and strive to retain their top talent. School leaders should take deliberate steps to build a collaborative culture among the adults in their buildings, leading to improved opportunities for their students. Strong peer culture leverages the strengths of effective teachers, allowing them to lead, and supporting the development of all teachers.

Rethinking Peer Culture

Schools are often strategic about their student culture because they know that in the absence of intentional behavioral norms, unintentional and potentially problematic cultural norms are established. The same principle can be applied to adults. However, many fewer schools plan for effective staff culture, leading to schools where the loudest voices on staff may not be focused on student learning and teachers’ conversations may focus more on problems than solutions. School culture is often cited as a reason why great teachers leave their schools. Creating a place where great teachers want to stay is critical to making sure that students are getting the instruction they deserve each day.

Strong peer cultures - ones that support student learning and keep effective teachers in the building - are centered on effective teaching and are intentionally developed over time. Leaders are positioned to create cultures that inspire teachers to hone their practices, get even better at their jobs, and help more students learn.

What To Do

Promote a common vision of effective teaching in your school.

Great schools have a shared vision of what great teaching looks like that informs every classroom practice and ultimately shapes everything that happens in the school. The vision supplies a shared language for what great teaching looks and a goal around which all students, teachers, parents and staff can rally.

To establish and communicate your vision, first define a clear and specific picture of what excellent teaching looks like, including concrete, rigorous, and consistent expectations for every classroom. Conduct multiple training and norming sessions with teachers at the beginning of the school year, along with videos of exemplar teaching to bring the vision to life. Once the vision has been established, integrate your definition of effective teaching into teacher hiring, professional development, feedback, and evaluation so that it is at the heart of what you do and a constant topic of conversation. By providing this vision, you are enabling teachers to work together toward the same outcome, something that is essential for any team to succeed.

Make great teaching visible.

Inspire your teachers to continue to improve by celebrating successes and highlighting the story you want to tell about your school. Great teaching moments and strong results should be celebrated and shared with the school community in order to reinforce what is possible. Set aside 5 to 10 minutes in regular meetings to publicly celebrate great teaching, such as sharing a great moment you saw during a recent classroom observation, or showing video of excellent teaching in the building. Double down on your effective teachers by offering them the chance to reach
more students through leadership roles such as mentors, coaches, grade-level team leaders, or leading model classrooms so that they are seen and heard more often. Encourage peer observations (within your school or in a similar local context) and provide opportunities for teachers to recognize the hard work and effectiveness of their colleagues.

Support high-quality teacher collaboration.
Teacher collaboration allows teachers to share best practices and, when done well, it provides them with helpful sources of feedback, support, and development besides their administrator. The demands on a principal's time are great, and peer collaboration offers teachers the opportunity to learn from each other, crowd-source solutions to their challenges, and share resources. Allow teachers to push each other’s practice forward by providing them with common time during the work day to meet.

Ensure that teachers are spending their collaboration time on the things that are going to have the greatest impact on students by providing structures to ensure the time together is focused, meaningful, and productive, yet not so rigid that it becomes a checklist. For example, encourage peer observations and support teachers on giving each other good feedback, and provide teachers with a protocol for analyzing student work. Attend collaborative times regularly to see your teachers work together, look for ways to improve the collaboration, and to contribute your own ideas. As collaboration time becomes part of the culture of your school, guide teacher communities toward being more independent and use teacher leaders to continue to evolve collaboration processes.

Set the expectation that meetings be solutions-oriented.
All too often in schools, meeting time is spent either sharing updates that could be emailed or commiserating on the very real problems teachers face. Group problem-solving can be a powerful tool and teachers should have space to share their concerns. Set the expectation that your staff be solutions-oriented, model that you will focus staff on what is in their locus of control, and generate solutions where none existed before.

How do you do this? Plan clear agendas and specific outcomes for meetings. Allow for brief venting when necessary, but then redirect conversations to what can be done about it. Be very clear about what is set in stone and where there may be flexibility in the way things are currently done. Respond positively when teachers make thoughtful, out of the box suggestions, even if you’re not able to implement them. Not only will this focus on solutions make for a more collaborative school culture, it will also build investment in the school culture as teachers see their ideas making a difference for students.

PRINCIPALS IN ACTION
Located in East Memphis and led by Sharon McNary, Richland Elementary is a high-performing school where excellent teaching is celebrated and collaboration valued. 100% her of teachers agree, “The time I spend collaborating with my colleagues is productive.” Here are three concrete ways Principal McNary has created a positive peer culture in her school:

Data-driven PLCs: As Principal McNary describes, “Teachers want meetings that aren’t about the fluff.” To maximize time spent in PLC meetings, teachers develop agendas that focus on student outcomes. During these meetings, teachers co-plan lessons and reflect on the results of lessons they previously planned together, focusing on areas they can improve. Teachers have the opportunity to gain insight into best practices used by their peers, celebrate successes, and analyze failures.

Highlighting “Wow” Moments: Whenever Principal McNary sees a strategy or practice that produces a “wow” moment she takes a picture, shares it during a faculty meeting, and gives the teacher the opportunity to elaborate further. At Richland “teachers… want to learn from one another and continue to grow,” she says. Twice a month there are concurrent professional development sessions led by high performing teachers. Teachers are able to evaluate their own needs and choose from three sessions. Allowing teachers to share best practices helps to build trust among colleagues.

Problem-Solving Committee: This committee meets monthly with Principal McNary to discuss any school-related issues. Each school department is represented on the committee and all resolutions are final. At Richland, teachers know that their voices matter and are invested in developing solutions they know will be implemented.
Address ineffective teaching in your school.

It is important to identify struggling teachers at your school and take swift action to support them in improving or remove teachers who do not show significant improvement with support. Schools that refuse to tolerate ineffective teaching keep more of their top teachers for longer. Inevitably, some teachers will struggle despite good intentions and hard work. Be honest with them about their weaknesses, give them regular feedback and support, and set reasonable limits on how long they have to show significant improvement (months, not years). However difficult it may be, do not allow unsuccessful teachers to linger. The longer they do, the more it sends the message that ineffective teaching is acceptable or even worse, that effectively teaching students is an impossible task.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES
For more resources on Peer Culture, check out the Teacher Talent Toolbox.

CONTACT US
Have additional questions? Contact a member of our team at insight@tntp.org.