Teams Work: Tips for Coordinating a Strong School Psychologist Team

A strong team of school psychologists within or between school systems is essential when providing effective school-based psychological services. Characterized as professional learning communities (PLCs), these teams are vital to ensure ongoing professional learning and mutual support and problem-solving for school psychologists. One example of a PLC that is relevant to the field of school psychology includes a continuous process through which school professionals work collaboratively to seek and share learning to increase their effectiveness as professionals for students’ benefit, acting on what they learn (Hord, 1997).

Core Characteristics Used to Describe Effective PLCs

Professional collaboration, collegiality, and efficacy are core components of any team. Collaboration is essential, and staff members should work together regarding professional issues (Jones, Stall, & Yarbrough, 2013). In the context of collaborative work, the potential exists for conflict. Somech and Drach-Zahavy (2007) highlight the importance of negotiation so that team members have the capacity to influence discussions. Efficacy is key to ensuring staff ownership in the work of the team: Staff members feel that they can influence important decisions and, as a consequence, become proactive problem solvers (Jones et al., 2013). Collegiality allows team members to feel included, valued, and part of a community, which cannot exist when members work in isolation.
Basic Tips for Organizing Effective Teams
Organizing or enhancing the effectiveness of a school psychology team takes leadership. Ideally, relevant administrators (e.g., Director of Pupil Services, Special Education Director, etc.) facilitates such teaming; however, absent this, school psychologists can take the lead and establish a PLC following some basic steps and, if necessary, communicate the outcomes and benefits to convince district leadership to support the effort.

Tips for Large Districts
- Organize teams based on areas of interest (e.g., crisis intervention, behavior, mental health, advocacy, early career).
- Organize teams based on location or schools served.

General Tips
- Set aside time in advance to meet several times through the school year, and ensure follow-up with the meetings along with documentation.
- Utilize existing forms of communication, such as e-mail, instant messaging, and collaborative office productivity software.
- Ensure sustainable leadership to mitigate the effects of attrition.
- Create a common mission and goals for the group and meetings.
- Provide time to reflect about goals, strategies, and processes (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2007).
- Ensure active participation, especially in setting the organizational and team level goals (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2007).
- Provide opportunities for shared decision making.
- Plan opportunities for ongoing professional development.
- Differentiate professional development opportunities based on needs.
- Observe assessment data to identify student needs within or between districts.
- Exchange information, knowledge, and experience (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2007).
- With collaborative work, allow for negotiations.

Tips for Small Districts
- Form teams with school psychologists from surrounding districts or counties.
- Consult online professional communities, such as the NASP Communities for further professional development from shared teaming.

Benefits of Effective School Psychology Teams
School psychologists commonly speak enthusiastically about the value of teams and their multifaceted benefits (Annan & Ryba, 2013). A list of the benefits of teaming includes:
- Ensures high quality professional practice.
- Ensures practices are visible and open.
• Provides opportunities to learn from new and established members.
• Affords opportunities to inform and affirm one another’s practices on the job.
• Promotes personal and public safety by allowing team members to identify when colleagues require help.
• Provides opportunities to seek or be asked for advice, or to clarify concerns (Annan & Ryba, 2013).
• Promotes innovation through team heterogeneity (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2007).
• Improves overall effectiveness of services provided (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2007).

References

This handout is part of a series developed in conjunction with NASP’s 2013 School Psychology Awareness Week theme, “We’re All In! Teams Work,” designed to help school psychologists support improved team skills in students and staff. For additional information tip sheets, visit the NASP website (www.nasponline.org/communications/spaw/2013).

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