Best Practices/Tom W. Many, Ed.D. and Susan K. Sparks

Slip Sliding Away
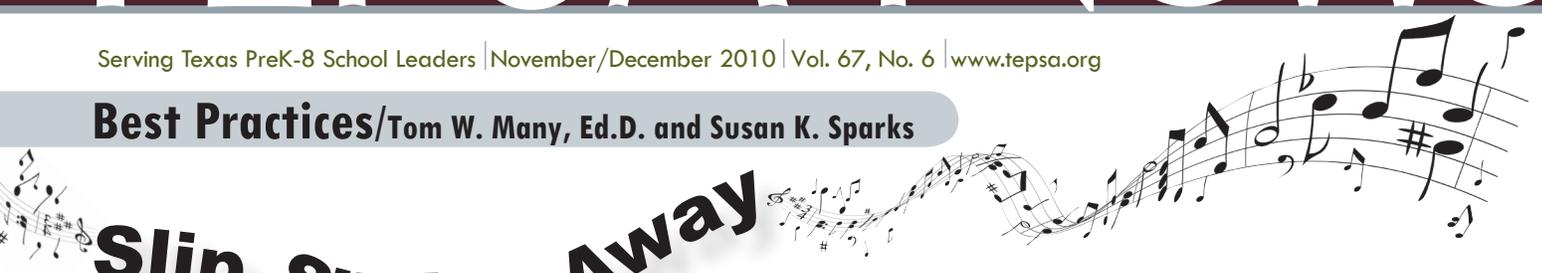
You know the feeling. You have created the structures for collaboration in your school. You have provided teams with the time and tools to collaborate, defined the work, and checked for consensus every step of the way. You have done all the right things to ensure teams will flourish in your school, and yet the teams simply aren't producing the kinds of results you expected. You feel like the chorus in the Simon and Garfunkel song, and despite your best efforts, it is all just "slip sliding away."

The Principal's Role in Monitoring Teams

In most organizations, what gets monitored gets done. In a Professional Learning Community, monitoring begins with ensuring that every teacher regularly addresses and responds to the critical questions of learning as a member of a collaborative team. These questions—what do we want our students to know and be able to do, how will we know they have learned it, and what will we do when they do or don't learn—are the centerpiece of the work that takes place around the table of every team meeting.

How effectively each team answers these critical questions becomes one of the principal's primary monitoring responsibilities. The best way for principals to fulfill this responsibility is to have first hand knowledge of what teams are doing on a daily basis. This requires regular communication between the principal and collaborative teams. Said another way, in order to ensure success, principals must regularly monitor the work of teams in their schools.

Strategies for Monitoring Teams

One of the simplest ways principals can monitor the work of teams is to be visible and available. An effective strategy is to drop into team meetings from time to time. During these informal and impromptu visits, principals look for evidence of teams using pacing guides, analyzing common assessments, planning for interventions and sharing strategies for delivering more effective lessons. Principals watch for collaborative behaviors and focus attention on how time is spent during team meetings.

A prerequisite of effective monitoring is regular communication between a principal and the teams in their schools. Teams have found countless ways to share information with principals, and many routinely publish the minutes of team meetings on a weekly basis. Some teams use handwritten journals for this purpose, while others have incorporated technology using email and podcasts as the vehicle for communicating. Legacy High School, a large suburban high school in Broomfield, Colorado, uses specially designed electronic templates to report progress and keep absent team members in the loop. The templates create an open line of communication with the building principal and serve as an archival record of the team's work.

Encouraging reflection and self-assessment can be another powerful way to monitor the progress of teams. Several excellent rubrics describing the various stages of team development are available. Two that come to mind immediately—one written by Graham and Ferriter and another by DuFour, et. al.—provide principals with concrete blueprints for monitoring the development of teams. Allowing teams to reflect on their progress keeps them focused on developing their own expertise and provides an opportunity for principals to monitor their teams through the eyes of the team members themselves.

Principals can also monitor teams by asking questions designed to gather evidence that teams are focused on the right work. In District 96 in Buffalo Grove, Illinois, teams bring results of their assessments to regularly scheduled meetings with their principal. In these meetings, principals ask three important questions:

1) Which students are proficient?
2) Which students are not proficient?
3) How is the team providing more time and support for the students who have not yet met proficiency?

The questions not only serve as a way to monitor teams but also allow principals to engage in discussions about teaching and learning, gain first hand knowledge of student
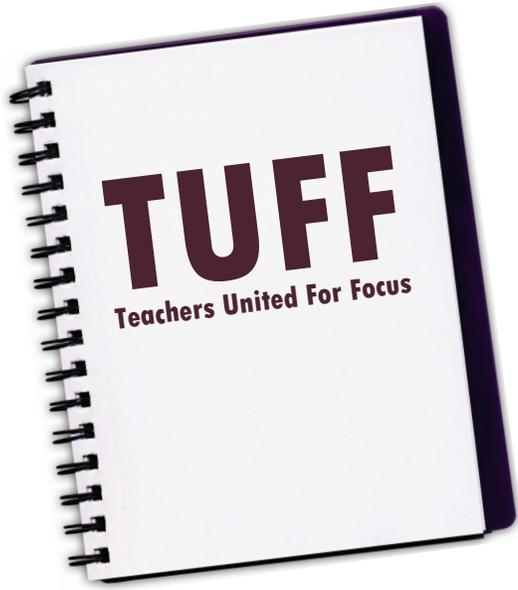
progress, and help teams reallocate and match resources to ensure all students learn.

Perhaps the most effective way to monitor teams is through work products and artifacts. Schools have found creating TUFF (**T**eachers **U**nited **F**or **F**ocus) notebooks facilitates the collection of artifacts. Each TUFF notebook contains sections for the team's SMART goal(s) for the year, a copy of team norms, meeting agenda and minutes, and examples of any work products the team has generated in response to the critical questions of learning. The TUFF notebook is kept in a central place so it is always available for review by the principal and members of the team. Teachers in Allen Parrish, Louisiana, have found TUFF notebooks are an effective way to keep their teams focused on student learning while si-

multaneously collecting examples of the work products and artifacts generated during their team meetings.

Finally, some schools have adopted the use of specific tools designed to structure team meetings and agendas. In *The Collaborative Teacher*, a graphic organizer is described as one such tool. The organizer has a place for teams to record their SMART goal, team norms, purpose and non-purpose for the meetings, and an outline of the team's past work. The organizer also includes a section titled "Next Steps." Teams are encouraged to end each meeting by describing (in writing) what was accomplished and what do they plan to accomplish the next time they meet? At the very bottom of the meeting organizer there is space for teams to identify an area of concern, request specific training, or simply ask a question of their principal. Once forwarded to the principal, this organizer establishes an effective way for principals and teams to communicate.

We know about the importance of creating structures for teams, but successful principals also embrace their responsibility to monitor the work of teams. They recognize that "a critical step in moving an organization from rhetoric to reality is to establish the indicators of progress to be monitored, the process for monitoring them, and the means for sharing the results throughout the organization." (DuFour et. al., *Learning By Doing*, page 27) Instead of allowing teams to "slip slide away," these principals keep their teams on solid ground by regularly monitoring the work of teams in systematic ways. ■

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.*

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References

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