



## **This Year's Homework: New Roles and New Opportunities**

The carefully chosen backpacks have made a month's worth of trips back and forth to school, the diligently sharpened no. 2 pencils are already put to good use, and we hope that those summer reading assignments are paying off! As we get into the swing of the new school year, we all have such high hopes for what our children will accomplish. We envision new learning breakthroughs, supportive bonds with teachers and classmates, and the sparks of motivation and engagement that will help guide students to identify and pursue their paths to success. We believe our children will thrive in supportive environments that meet their basic needs, nurture their interests and curiosities, and inspire and support their learning.

Yet the reality in too many of today's classrooms is starkly different. New teacher turnover remains high – in some school districts, the teacher dropout rate far surpasses the student dropout rate – and veteran teacher retirement is about to spike. Many accomplished veterans, including those who could have served as models and mentors for younger colleagues, have already left. New and inexperienced teachers who fill the retirees' vacancies are often as unfamiliar with the classroom as their students, and don't know how to tap into the knowledge developed by effective veteran teachers with decades of experience. In 20 states across the country, more than half of the current teachers are over the age of 50. Teacher retirement – the average is age 59 – is approaching an unprecedented peak in the next five years, and schools currently have no way to transfer the knowledge and skills of one generation of teachers to the next.

How can we change this picture?

**The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF)** has been raising this very question in states, districts, and schools across the country for the past year: if we didn't have the schools we have now, what would we create?

Simply fixing the schools we have won't work. Stand-and-deliver, text-based instruction by solo teachers is neither educationally sound nor economically viable. Teamwork and collaborative learning and problem-solving are the keys to success in 21<sup>st</sup> century organizations. All of us in our workplaces invent and reinvent our work, join forces to solve problems, use innovative technologies, share information, and acquire new skills. We need to create schools that look and function like the places where today's youth will live and work.

Education leadership, policymakers, and teachers are eager to tap into the **collaborative power of teamwork** that has become the key to success in every 21<sup>st</sup> century high performing organization. In a recent NCTAF survey of 400 teachers across the country, 70% of teachers said they were interested in a new model and could see themselves playing a role in a collaborative learning team. Professional learning communities in teaching have been expanded to include collaborative teaming at the district and state level – multiplying the effect of collaboration.

NCTAF is working with several states using teamwork to create 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environments. West Virginia, for instance, has become a leader in developing collaborative teams – in part because the state is facing one of the worst retirement crises in the country. A whopping 68% of the state's teaching force is already over age 50 and will retire in the next decade. A strong comprehensive state department of education initiative created collaborative learning teams to focus on teacher training and assessment. The success of these teams – and the clear message from participants that the **collaboration is what sparked their commitment and excitement** – has led to a blossoming interest in team training at the district and school levels. In West Virginia, school and community efforts to work collaboratively are growing just as the state and district initiatives are reaching out to meet them.

In Maryland, NCTAF is working with two counties and NASA Goddard Space Flight Center to engage retiring NASA engineers, who built the space program and are now ready for an encore learning challenge: developing a new generation of scientists. These NASA engineers are helping students prepare for careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics by becoming adjunct members of learning teams that are centered around real-life projects and led by accomplished educators.

Collaborative teams, which emphasize shared purpose, shared plans, and shared accountability, increase the options, resources, and perspectives contributing to students' learning and educational experiences. In addition, strong teams can absorb the currently inevitable teacher attrition – if one person leaves, the team carries on, having benefitted from the knowledge and

expertise contributed by that person and with the capacity to sustain his or her contribution. Learning teams also provide the opportunity to think expansively and innovatively about staffing schools. With a strong core team focused on improving teaching and learning, resources traditionally thought of as “external” can be incorporated seamlessly into the learning environment.

**For instance, learning teams provide a structure to incorporate millions of Baby Boomers** who are eager to give back to society through education – and who are the largest, healthiest, and most accomplished generation of retirees in history. “Cross-generational” learning teams combine the collaborative teaming strategies proven to improve teaching quality and student achievement with the proven power of interventions using older volunteers (see, for instance, the Experience Corps literacy volunteers research). Cross-generational teams leverage a broad array of knowledge, skills, and resources offered by encore careerists and teachers at all stages of careers to improve learning for both students and adults. This exciting new structure connects resources and proven strategies directly to needs, connects teachers to additional support, connects new teachers to experienced veterans, and connects Baby Boomers with knowledge and skills to sustained, meaningful work in schools.

Engaged Baby-Boomers who work side-by-side with other members of the teaching team can fundamentally redefine the traditional role of a classroom volunteer. Instead of relegating skilled volunteers to cafeteria or recess duty, talented Baby Boomers can make a difference in the classroom over a sustained period of time – improving education, supporting the teacher of record, and helping schools weather the coming staffing crisis. They will be part of a team that improves student learning while pioneering a staffing structure and infusing the curriculum and instruction with “real life” examples of applying content. Teams will also build a structure and a school culture that can embrace these individuals as part-time paid employees, especially if they are transitioning into retirement from another sector. This type of team will be especially powerful for science and mathematics learning – subjects often taught by teachers without degrees or majors in the field in which they teach.

Just as we carefully construct learning experiences for students based on what they already know and what they need to master next, learning teams will provide skills, training, and support for all involved – new teachers, veteran teachers seeking new skills, and Baby Boomers looking to bring their experiences to classrooms and students.

Working teams of adults with different backgrounds will model a genuine learning process, encouraging students to see themselves as learners and see collaboration and inquiry as critical

tools. Teachers in this type of arrangement will help guide the structure of the team to best benefit the students, and will themselves benefit from added support and an environment that encourages them to grow professionally.

The time to create new school staffing structures and teaching and learning environments is now. Federal stimulus funding focused on state and regional innovations can provide the start-up support for collaborative learning teams made up of individuals with varying experiences and ages – teams that could then be supported by redirected recruitment and professional development funding.

The “Twenty-First Century Schools Act” should replace the No Child Left Behind Act with the purpose of supporting national, state, and local leaders who are deploying learning teams to build a 21<sup>st</sup> century education system.