



# HARVARD EDUCATION LETTER

## INSIDE

### interview

Sharon Griffin  
on PreK–3 Math 4

### point of view

Nichols and Berliner  
on the Dangers of  
High-Stakes Testing 8

## More Than “Making Nice”

Getting teachers to (truly) collaborate

by Laura Pappano

There was no yellow Post-It note, no collegial suggestion like, “Hey, I’ve tried these ...” Newly hired French teacher Amy Moran merely found a stack of worksheets tossed on her desk by a colleague soon after she arrived at Westford Academy, a public high school in Westford, Mass.

With 10 years of teaching already under her belt, Moran had seen students benefit when teachers shared observations about strategies, lessons, and test results. The pile of worksheets made tangible what Moran already knew: She and her new colleague weren’t working together. The two teachers gave students different tests and assessed the results separately. Who knew if their students were learning the same things? “To dump papers on a person’s desk doesn’t mean anything; it’s not helpful,” Moran recalls of the incident that occurred seven years ago.

It’s hardly rare to find teachers who don’t click. But such behavior—once considered an unfortunate personality conflict—is increasingly seen as a barrier to school success. Spurred by shifting teacher demographics and the drive for standards-based instruction, schools across the country are pressing teachers to take active roles in changing practice and to work together more effectively.

Principals in particular are responding by requiring teachers to participate in activities designed to encourage effective collaboration. They are going beyond simply providing common planning time, and setting specific tasks and goals that depend on collaboration, such as writing common assessments, identifying “power (essential) standards,” and devising common curricula. They are also structuring meetings to help teachers stay on track and offering feedback.

- At Robert Adams Middle School in Holliston, Mass., new principal Jessica Huizenga revamped how teachers work. She provides common planning time for grade-level subject teachers to create and assess lessons together and demands that teachers submit written logs of their discussions as proof of real collaboration.
- As the founding principal of the three-year-old Chicago Academy High School, Brian Sims hired team-oriented teachers because, he says, “I wanted it to be a collaborative environment.” He has assigned multiple teachers to teach different sections of the same course and requires them to create common curricula and assessments. To keep collaboration on track, Sims regularly attends teacher meetings.
- At Adlai Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Ill., principal Janet Gonzalez says the school’s collaborative culture shows in its organizational chart. It’s shaped like a bull’s eye, rather than a pyramid, and depicts a two-way flow of ideas between teachers and administrators. The key to success, she says, is the role of teacher leaders, who work with administrators to draft agendas for grade- and subject-level meetings and who keep talk focused on effective practices, rather than allowing griping or chit-chat.

**New teachers “expect to work with other people. They do not expect to be left on their own.”**

The overall goal of creating a professional learning community requires a deep shift in teacher relations. Teachers are now asked to peel away facades, admit vulnerabilities, share precious insights, ask tough questions, compromise, and give colleagues real help—not just worksheets. Creating a safe and productive environment for these discussions is a new challenge for many principals and other school leaders.

