



Chapter 8

Collaboration

Key points

- High-quality teacher collaboration goes beyond sharing resources and materials – it involves teachers working together interdependently to achieve a common goal through the sharing of evidence-informed practices, knowledge and problem solving.
- Schools that engage in collaboration practices are more likely to improve teaching and learning outcomes, resulting in greater school improvement.
- A supportive school culture, where teachers feel safe and supported to jointly address teaching and learning challenges, underpins effective collaboration.
- Collaboration requires a specific, shared focus aimed at improving teaching and learning outcomes.
- Teachers require more than just time to collaborate. They need carefully organised structures to guide how collaboration takes place, with clear protocols and knowledgeable staff to facilitate meaningful and productive collaboration.



What is collaboration?

Collaboration in schools occurs within and between a wide variety of groups, including students, families, community members, non-teaching staff and teaching staff. The focus of this chapter is collaboration between teachers, which has been recognised as a critical professional practice for improving teaching and learning outcomes (AITSL n.d.).

Teacher collaboration involves teachers working interdependently to achieve a common goal through the sharing of evidence-informed practices, knowledge and problem solving. It is grounded in a supportive culture, mutually respectful relationships and clear structures and protocols. Further, it harnesses the expertise of the collective to share successful and innovative evidence-informed practices across the teaching profession to support students' educational outcomes.

Collaboration involves more than teachers simply sharing information or resources. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2021) notes that teachers can work together in a range of ways in carrying out key aspects of their role aligned to the [Australian Professional Standards for Teachers](#) that can be considered along a continuum with 'networking' (or simple information exchange) at one end and 'collaboration' at the other. Some common approaches to collaboration in K-12 settings include professional learning communities, communities of practice, teacher teams, teacher learning groups, critical friend groups, teacher networks (Vangrieken et al. 2015) and various models of collaborative inquiry (CESE 2023).

Collaboration can involve synchronous activities (for example, face-to-face or online meetings) or asynchronous activities (for example, video recording a lesson for a colleague to watch at a later time to provide reflective feedback). With the growing availability of technology, teachers can now collaborate not just within their own schools but across networks, states and international borders (Hargreaves and O'Connor 2018a). However, more research is needed to determine the most effective ways to collaborate online.

What the evidence says

Teacher collaboration can improve student and teacher outcomes

International education researchers point to collaborative practices between teachers within and across schools as important features of many high-performing schooling systems (National College for Teaching and Leadership 2012; UK Department for Education 2015; Jensen et al. 2016; Schleicher 2018). In Australia, the importance of implementing and embedding effective collaborative practice is also widely acknowledged. The Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System states that by supporting teachers to improve in practice, collaboration strengthens the collective efforts of schools to address and resolve education challenges in innovative ways (Australian Government Department of Education 2023).

A large body of research shows that collaboration can positively impact student achievement (Bryk and Schneider 2002; Goddard et al. 2007, 2010, 2015; Ronfeldt et al. 2015; Vangrieken et al. 2015). Some researchers suggest that this benefit is likely due to collaboration improving teaching quality, which in turn improves student outcomes (Wullschleger et al. 2025). In addition, collaboration can foster collective teacher efficacy – the shared belief among teachers and school leaders that, together, they can positively impact student outcomes (Goddard et al. 2015). Research suggests a mutually reinforcing relationship between teacher self-efficacy (each individual teacher’s confidence in their own ability to improve student outcomes) and collective teacher efficacy (Goddard et al. 2004; Donohoo 2018). High levels of collective teacher efficacy (Goddard et al. 2015; Hattie 2023) and teacher self-efficacy (Zee and Koomen 2016) are positively associated with higher student achievement.



Collaboration has also been found to have a positive relationship with teacher outcomes. For example, results from the Teaching and Learning in Schools (TALIS) survey show that teachers who engage in collaboration with colleagues tend to report higher levels of job satisfaction, motivation and self-efficacy (OECD 2020).

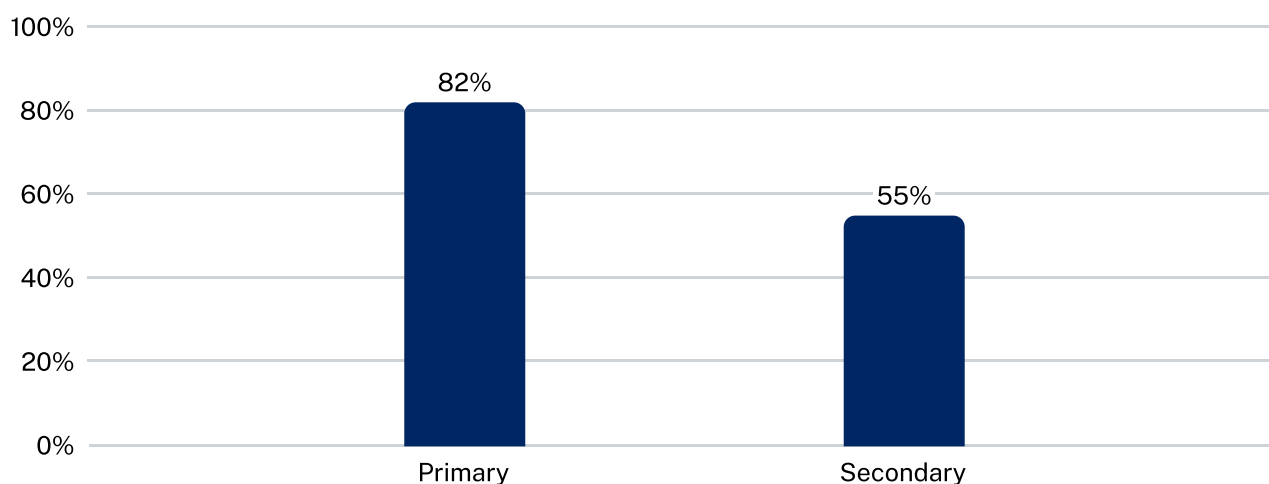
There is limited research comparing the types of collaboration practices that are most effective in improving teaching and learning outcomes. Instead, this chapter focuses on synthesising the evidence on common enablers and features of effective teacher collaboration. Commonly identified enablers and features of effective teacher collaboration include a supportive school culture with a high degree of trust (Bryk and Schneider 2002; Hargreaves and O’Connor 2018a), a shared focus on improving teaching and learning outcomes (Vangrieken et al. 2015; Hargreaves 2019; OECD 2020; AITSL n.d.), clear structures and protocols (Levine and Marcus 2010; Vangrieken et al. 2015; Hargreaves 2019; de Jong et al. 2022) and knowledgeable staff to facilitate the collaboration (Hargreaves and O’Connor 2018a, 2018b; de Jong et al. 2022). School leaders are also often recognised as critical for establishing and fostering these enablers and features (ACER 2016; Hargreaves and O’Connor 2018a; AITSL n.d.).

NSW teachers engage in collaboration practices, but there is an opportunity for secondary teachers to extend their participation

Some professionals, such as doctors or lawyers, have the benefit of seeing their peers in action as part of their day-to-day environments, and can see firsthand what works. Teachers, however, often need to work harder than many other professionals to break down the potential ‘silo effect’ to collaborate with their colleagues. Survey data from NSW public schools suggests that this may be additionally challenging in secondary schools. Compared to primary teachers, a smaller proportion of secondary teachers report working with colleagues to develop cross-curricular or common learning opportunities for students (82% and 55% respectively; Figure 8.1).

Figure 8.1

Percentage of teachers who collaborate on cross-curricular or common learning opportunities, by primary and secondary teachers, NSW public schools, 2024



Source: CESE analysis of Tell Them From Me data, collected from 18,196 primary teachers and 10,959 secondary teachers across 1,424 NSW public schools in 2024.

A supportive school culture anchored in trust underpins effective collaboration

A supportive school culture built upon trust is critical for effective collaboration. Collaboration can involve teachers and school leaders engaging in challenging conversations, taking risks, making mistakes and being open to giving and receiving constructive feedback so that teaching and learning outcomes can be improved. However, this requires the foundations of a safe, supportive environment and relationships based on mutual trust (Hargreaves and O'Connor 2018a). For example, in a longitudinal study of 400 schools, researchers found a strong relationship between the degree of trust in a school community and academic school improvement (Bryk and Schneider 2002). The researchers posit that trust lays the necessary organisational conditions for teachers to engage in activities that lead to improved outcomes, including teacher collaboration. However, building a supportive school culture anchored in trust takes time. It is not something that can be achieved in ad hoc workshops or training days (although these activities can be helpful). Instead, trust is built and validated during daily interactions with others and is anchored in mutually respectful relationships (Bryk and Schneider 2002).

Effective collaboration is grounded in a shared focus to improve teaching and learning outcomes

Effective collaboration requires a clear focus on improving teaching and learning outcomes. The literature recognises that a clear focus and specific goals facilitate effective collaboration, while conversely, the uncertainty of goals can be a barrier to collaboration. Using data is an effective way to make evidence-informed decisions about the focus of collaboration (Vangrieken et al. 2015). The focus should be specific, measurable and manageable to promote improvements in teaching and learning outcomes (OECD 2020; AITSL n.d.). However, teachers and school leaders need to be careful the focus is not so narrow that it limits opportunities for deep exploration of teaching and learning (de Jong et al. 2022).

In addition, the focus should be meaningful and relevant to all members in the group (Vangrieken et al. 2015; AITSL n.d.). When teachers are included in the decision-making and their collective goals and interests are prioritised, they are more likely to be engaged and motivated to collaborate more regularly (Hargreaves 2019; OECD 2020). In contrast, when a top-down, accountability approach is taken, it can result in a loss of trust and participation by teachers (Hargreaves 2019).



Collaboration requires clear structures, protocols and facilitation by knowledgeable staff

While teachers require time to collaborate, they also need structures to organise how collaboration takes place. Protocols and strong structures that provide teachers with clear guidelines and steps promote collaboration (Vangrieken et al. 2015; Hargreaves 2019; de Jong et al. 2022). For example, when compared to less structured collaboration meetings, protocols and established structures have been shown to facilitate more focused discussions about teaching and learning (Levine and Marcus 2010).

The literature also highlights the importance of appointing a knowledgeable staff member as a facilitator to reinforce the structure and agreed protocols so that collaboration is meaningful and productive (de Jong et al. 2022). This is particularly important when criticism and differing opinions are likely to arise. Here, the facilitator plays a key role in reinforcing protocols and structures to maintain relationships and a supportive culture (Hargreaves and O'Connor 2018a). In addition, facilitators need the relevant knowledge and expertise in curriculum, teaching and learning to ground discussions in evidence-based research and knowledge (Hargreaves and O'Connor 2018b). For example, when strengthening culturally responsive teaching for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, it is important that facilitation is led by staff who have the required knowledge and expertise, and that authentic engagement with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community members takes place (CESE 2022c).

School leaders are vital to the success of teacher collaboration

Teachers' individual attitudes and openness towards collaboration can promote or hinder collaboration efforts in a school (Vangrieken et al. 2015). School leaders play a key role in shifting teachers' perspectives from working in silos to recognising the importance and benefits of working collectively to improve student outcomes. When school leaders enable a positive culture of collaboration, teacher collective efficacy is enhanced, which in turn improves students' academic outcomes (Goddard et al. 2015; Hattie 2023).

AITSL (n.d.) places the responsibility for establishing the structures and conditions that support meaningful and productive collaboration with school leaders. The literature (for example, ACER 2016; Hargreaves and O'Connor 2018a; AITSL n.d.) suggests that school leaders can promote meaningful collaboration by:

- fostering a safe environment where teachers feel comfortable being innovative, engaging in constructive debates, and giving and receiving honest and open feedback
- creating opportunities for shared decision-making so that all staff are invested in collaborating to improve student outcomes
- providing frequent, structured opportunities for teachers to collaborate so that time is used efficiently and effectively.

Other What Works Best 2025 resources on collaboration



- What Works Best 2025 practical guide – Collaboration
- What Works Best 2025 illustration of practice – Collaboration at Ashford Central School



This is an extract from the **What Works Best 2025 – Evidence guide for excellent schools.**

The full evidence guide provides an overview of the evidence that underpins each of the 8 themes: high expectations, explicit teaching, effective feedback, using data to inform practice, assessment, classroom management, wellbeing and collaboration. It also includes the references for the sources cited in this chapter.

For the full suite of What Works Best 2025 resources, including practical guides and illustrations of practice, scan the QR code or visit education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/education-data-and-research/what-works-best.



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