Singletons and Small Schools: Structuring Meaningful Professional Learning Teams for Every Teacher

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Solution Tree
Who ARE Singletons?

One of the greatest challenges in any PLC is finding meaningful learning partnerships for the singletons—art teachers, band directors, media specialists, foreign language teachers—in a building.

Teachers working in small schools or unique subject areas often struggle to find partners, too. When you have only one physics—or third grade, or biology—teacher, with whom can they learn?

Session Outcomes

- To explore five scenarios for implementing the PLC process in a small school or as a singleton
  - Structural change
  - Vertical teams
  - Interdisciplinary teams
  - Support role
  - Electronic teams
- To develop the beginnings of an action plan for overcoming your unique challenges
+ Checking In

Who are we as a group?
- Small schools?
  - Elementary or Secondary
- Subject singletons: music, art, vocational, media specialist, language, etc.
- Administrators?
- Teachers?
- Other?

+ Checking In

As a small school or singleton teacher, what challenges do you currently face in collaborating in a meaningful way?

Chart your responses at your tables.

+ Collaboration Lite

“Mere collegiality won’t cut it. Even discussions about curricular issues or popular strategies can feel good but go nowhere. The right image to embrace is of a group of teachers who meet regularly to share, refine, and assess the impact of lessons and strategies continuously to help increasing numbers of students learn at higher levels.”

—Schmoker, Results Now: How We Can Achieve Unprecedented Improvements in Teaching and Learning (2006)
The Dilemma of Small Schools and Singletons

With few if any common-content teachers, how do we collaborate as part of a PLC?

Our focus on learning must be reduced to common denominators so that meaningful collaboration can occur.

Rethinking Structures for Singletons

In many schools the structure is set up in opposition to collaboration and most people will not work in opposition to the structure.

“The truth is that the system changes individuals more often than individuals change the system.”


Rethinking Structures for Singletons

Answer the following questions while reading about White Pine Middle School’s work to change structures:

What are the strengths of creating teams of teachers who are teaching the same subjects? What are the weaknesses?

If this were an approach that you were going to implement in your building, what barriers would you need to overcome?
Vertical and Interdisciplinary Teams

**A Process for Vertical and Interdisciplinary Teams**

1. Organize teams based on what learning goals teachers have *in common*.
2. Focus on those issues which are common rather than those that are not.
3. Identify the most important *common outcome*.
5. Calibrate scoring and evaluate results.
6. Come back to the table with *common strategies* designed to improve performance.
**Here’s What’s Different**

Although the unit assessments are not exactly “common” from one grade level to the next, the skills often are.

**In groups,** determine what “common” skills could be focused on in language arts.

**Practice in Action**

Working together, kindergarten, first, and second grade teachers could develop a *shared rubric* defining the elements of a good sentence that is used by all teachers at all grade levels.

The *skills are common* even when the task isn’t.
Imagine that you are working as a member of a high school social studies team comprised of World History, U.S. History, and Government teachers. What could some common outcomes for your learning team be?

Examples:
• Making and defending an argument
• Relating the past to the present
• Synthesizing information
• Critically reading and analyzing primary sources

What is the common denominator?

Teams should set goals based on essential skills that are universal.
If your imaginary learning team decided to focus on critically reading and analyzing primary sources as its most important common outcome, what would your next steps be?

Practice in Action

Do all students take the exact same assessment?
Is there a different primary source for each content area?
Is the common assessment multiple choice or constructed response?
(There are no right or wrong answers!)

Pre-assess 
Post-assess

Over time the team can see if the common strategy they have chosen is working to improve students’ learning of essential skills, even if the content is different.
Interdisciplinary Teams
School to Careers Example:

Reflection …
Talk with your group.

How can you apply what you have learned so far to your situation?

Singletons Who Support “Momma T”
Think Jack Black, not Mr. T!
Synchronous and Asynchronous Tools for Singletons

Note: All tutorials and materials for this portion of the presentation can be found online at:

Tools for Developing Teams

“The core work of electronic learning teams is the same as the core work of teams who meet in person: investigating practice, developing common assessments, looking at student learning data. Digital tools just make it possible for that work to be done from remote locations.”


Twitter as an Electronic Starting Point

“I struggle to find time for PD in my already crowded day. With Twitter, I can learn easily and from anywhere. Whenever I have a few minutes to spare—between classes, on lunch duty, waiting for flights at the airport, just before going to bed—I’m checking the messages posted by my Twitter network.”

**Exploring Twitter**

**Tutorial 1:** The Twitter Homepage
http://screenr.com/FJq (1:42)

**Tutorial 2:** Posting Messages to Twitter
http://screenr.com/oJq (3:23)

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**Finding Potential Partners in Twitter**

“Educators new to Twitter wonder: ‘Where do I even begin? ... What resources can help me find teachers and principals with the same interests and passions as mine?’”

—Ferriter, Ramsden, & Sheninger, *Communicating and Connecting With Social Media* (2011)

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**Finding Potential Partners in Twitter**

**Tutorial 3:** Finding Peers to Learn With
http://screenr.com/sQq (3:19)

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Tools for Developing Teams

Tutorial 6: Tools for Developing Teams  
- Several videos here

The Role of Administration in Supporting PLCs for Singletons

Challenges to Districtwide PLCs
- What is the expectation?
- How will teams be held accountable and by whom?

It takes an increased level of planning to ensure success.
**Leadership Matters**

“One of the great ironies in education is that it takes strong and effective educational leaders to create truly empowered people who are capable of sustaining improvement after the leader has gone.”


**Music Common Assessment**

**PLT Action Record**

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Cross-Discipline Teams

Rethinking Structures for Singletons

Answer the following questions while reading about Rolla High School’s work to change structures:

- What are the strengths of creating a team of singleton teachers focused on a common practice like intervening on behalf of struggling students? What are the weaknesses?

- If this were an approach that you were going to implement in your building, what barriers would you need to overcome?

Session Outcomes

- To explore five scenarios for implementing the PLC process in a small school or as a singleton
  - Structural change
  - Vertical teams
  - Interdisciplinary teams
  - Support role
  - Electronic teams

- To develop the beginnings of an action plan for overcoming your unique challenges
Before jumping into change, perhaps our first question we should answer for ourselves should be …

Why?

It can be done …

What will your story be?

Thank You!

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To schedule professional development, contact Solution Tree at international@solution-tree.com.

Resources


Examples of Common Assessments That Could Be Used in Non-Common Courses

1. ACT writing prompts could be used across language arts courses regardless of the content (actstudent.org/writing/sample/index.html).
   - Persuasive writing
   - Use of transitions, crafting thesis statements, conclusions, citing sources, etc.
   - Model responses are included on website.

   “Educators debate extending high school to five years because of increasing demands on students from employers and colleges to participate in extracurricular activities and community service in addition to having high grades. Some educators support extending high school to five years because they think students need more time to achieve all that is expected of them. Other educators do not support extending high school to five years because they think students would lose interest in school and attendance would drop in the fifth year. In your opinion, should high school be extended to five years?

   “In your essay, take a position on this question. You may write about either one of the two points of view given, or you may present a different point of view on this question. Use specific reasons and examples to support your position.”

2. WorkKeys sample items could be used in career and technical education courses (act.org/workkeys/assess/).
   - Business writing
   - Communication
   - Teamwork
   - Applied technology

   “At your office, employees are allowed to skip their morning and/or afternoon breaks to take longer lunch breaks. However, the personnel manager says that employees have been taking too much time on their lunch breaks as a result of this policy. She wants to require all employees to take their morning and afternoon breaks and the standard lunch break. Write a letter to the personnel manager explaining whether or not you are in favor of this proposal and why.”

3. ACT science questions could be used across science courses regardless of the content (actstudent.org/sampletest/science/sci_03.html).
   - Skill of reading and interpreting charts
   - Skill of hypothesizing based on past results
   - Skill of critically reading and analyzing scientific data
A student performed two studies to investigate the factors that affect the germination of peony seeds.

**Study 1**

Peony seeds were placed in dry containers. Some of the containers were stored at 5°C for either 4, 6, 8, or 10 weeks. The temperature and time periods were defined as the storage temperature and the storage period, respectively.

The peony seeds were divided evenly so that there were 20 sets of 25 seeds. Twenty Petri dishes were then prepared. Each contained damp paper. Each set of seeds was placed in a separate Petri dish. Each Petri dish was maintained at one of four temperatures for 30 days. The temperature and time periods were defined as the germination temperature and the germination period, respectively. Table 1 shows the number of seeds that germinated in each dish.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Storage period (weeks)</th>
<th>13°C</th>
<th>18°C</th>
<th>23°C</th>
<th>28°C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Storage temperature (°C)</th>
<th>13°C</th>
<th>18°C</th>
<th>23°C</th>
<th>28°C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


1. In general, the results of Study 1 suggest that peony seeds that are placed in a Petri dish containing damp paper are most likely to germinate when they are maintained at which of the following temperatures?

   A. 13°C
   B. 18°C
   C. 23°C
   D. 28°C
2. Suppose another set of 25 peony seeds had been included in Study 2 and these seeds had a storage temperature of 25°C and a germination temperature of 18°C. Based on the information provided, the number of seeds that would have germinated after being maintained for 30 days would most likely have been closest to:

   F. 0
   G. 8
   H. 16
   J. 24

3. In Study 2, at the storage temperature of 5°C, as germination temperature increased from 13°C to 28°C, the number of seeds that germinated:

   A. Decreased only
   B. Increased only
   C. Decreased, then increased
   D. Increased, then decreased

4. Which of the following sets of seeds was exposed to the same conditions prior to being placed in the Petri dishes?

   F. The seeds from Study 1 that were stored for eight weeks and the seeds from Study 2 that were stored at 5°C
   G. The seeds from Study 1 that were stored for eight weeks and the seeds from Study 2 that were stored at 15°C
   H. The seeds from Study 1 that were stored for 10 weeks and the seeds from Study 2 that were stored at 5°C
   J. The seeds from Study 1 that were stored for 10 weeks and the seeds from Study 2 that were stored at 15°C

5. A student stored 100 peony seeds at a constant temperature for 10 weeks. The student then divided the seeds into four sets and maintained them as described in Study 2. The results were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Germination temperature (°C)</th>
<th>Number of seeds that germinated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   These seeds most likely had a storage temperature of:

   A. 0°C
   B. 5°C
   C. 10°C
   D. 15°C

6. The experimental designs of Study 2 and Study 1 differed in that in Study 2:

   F. Storage temperature was held constant.
   G. Storage time was held constant.
   H. Germination temperature was varied.
   J. Germination time was varied.
Twitter for Singletons Videos

The following short video tutorials are designed to provide singletons who are working in professional learning communities with a quick overview of how Twitter can be used to find partners and to join conversations.

Twitter for Singletons #1: An Introduction to Twitter
http://screenr.com/FJq

Twitter for Singletons #2: Sharing Content in Twitter
http://screenr.com/oJq

Twitter for Singletons #3: Finding Potential Peers to Learn With
http://screenr.com/sQq

Twitter for Singletons #4: Using Hashtags to Find Partners
http://screenr.com/0Qq

Twitter for Singletons #5: Introducing the Music PLN
http://screenr.com/qQq
**Twitter for PLC Singletons**

One of the greatest challenges in any professional learning community is finding meaningful learning partnerships for the singletons—art teachers, band directors, media specialists, foreign language teachers—in a building. While many singletons choose to collaborate with learning teams that are studying content connected to their areas of personal and professional interest (media specialists partnering with reading teachers to study literacy) or work to offer targeted support to teams on an as needed basis (dance teachers designing physical interpretations of content with science teachers), Twitter can be used to connect any singleton to digital peers working in the same field. Use this handout to find electronic conversations and colleagues appropriate for the singletons in your school.

**Exploring Twitter Lists**

One of the first challenges singletons face is finding peers teaching the same content areas that they can network with. Thankfully, there are literally thousands of singletons who are using Twitter to connect with each other. Generally, the best place to start finding other singletons using Twitter are websites like We Follow (http://wefollow.com) and TweepML (http://www.tweepml.org), which allow users to quickly search for other eduTweets by content area and category.

Here are direct links to just a few collections of singletons using Twitter that can be found in the We Follow directory:

| Art Teachers: | http://wefollow.com/twitter/artteacher |
| Music Teachers: | http://wefollow.com/twitter/musicteacher |
| Band Directors: | http://wefollow.com/twitter/banddirector |
| School Librarians: | http://wefollow.com/twitter/schoollibrarian |
| Chemistry Teachers: | http://wefollow.com/twitter/chemistryteacher |
| Physics Experts: | http://wefollow.com/twitter/physics |
| Special Education Experts: | http://wefollow.com/twitter/specialeducation |
| School Counselors: | http://wefollow.com/twitter/schoolcounselor |

It’s important to remember good search practices when using services like We Follow and TweepML. Try several different terms when looking for singletons working in the same field as you. While generic terms like “dance” may turn up everything from belly dancers to professional ballerinas, more specific terms like “dance teacher” are likely to turn up practitioners that you can learn from.

It’s also important to remember that because Twitter is constantly growing—300,000 new users signed up every day in the Fall of 2010—and because Twitter is still a new tool to many educators—it’s a good idea to return to these lists every now and then to see if there are new singletons worth adding to your digital learning network.

**Exploring Twitter Followers**

The power of Twitter rests in the fact that Twitter users are constantly searching out likeminded peers. That means the networks of people that your Twitter friends are following are also likely to be perfect sources for finding new digital colleagues to add to your own personal learning network. After you’ve used We Follow or TweepML to find a few singletons working in your field, spend some time exploring their “Followers” and “Following” lists, found directly beneath their usernames:
In the sidebar of your own Twitter homepage, you’ll also notice that Twitter is generating a list of recommendations of users that you might be able to learn from. This list is built by automatically comparing your own Twitter network to the Twitter networks of people that you’re following:

There’s a measure of certainty that the new colleagues you find in both of these ways will be worth adding to your own Twitter network simply because they’ve been “prescreened,” either by your existing peers or by the computer algorithm that Twitter uses to generate the recommendations in your “Who to Follow” list.

Exploring Twitter Hashtags

Another way to find singletons in Twitter who are working in fields connected to your own is to explore ongoing Twitter conversations organized hashtags—short identifiers starting with # that users add to the end of specific posts to sort them into easily searchable categories. While new hashtags are being used by Twitter users all the time, some of the most popular for singleton teachers include:


- **#banddirector** (http://bit.ly/banddirectorhashtag): Related to the #musiced hashtag, #banddirector is a hashtag that is being used specifically to enable connections and sharing between band directors.

- **#artsed** (http://bit.ly/artsedhashtag): Perhaps the largest group of singletons in our schools are arts—both performing and visual—teachers. The #artsed hashtag can help any arts teacher to make connections with digital colleagues.

- **#mathchat** (http://bit.ly/mathchathashtag): While many schools are able to sustain vibrant math professional learning communities, there are often singletons working in high level classes. The #mathchat hashtag—which is used by educators across grade levels and curricular areas—can be a source for spotting potential partners for these teachers.

- **#sichat** (http://bit.ly/scichathashtag): Like the #mathchat hashtag, #sichat can be a source of potential connections for the singletons—physics teachers, chemistry teachers—in your science department.

- **#esol** (http://bit.ly/esolhashtag): Some of the most isolated singletons in our buildings are English for Speakers of Other Languages teachers. The #esol hashtag—which is one of the most active ongoing hashtag conversations for educators—is sure to provide networking opportunities for any ESOL teacher. ESOL teachers might also discover that the #esl hashtag (http://bit.ly/eslhashtag) is a valuable source of new connections as well.
#career tech educators: Career Tech Educators and Family and Consumer Science Teachers are equally isolated singletons in most of our buildings. That’s why the #career tech hashtag—along with the #wkdev hashtag—are so important. For perhaps the first time, you’ll be able to pair your career educators with likeminded colleagues.

#spedchat: Depending on the size of your school, special education teachers could very well feel like singletons, too. The #spedchat hashtag brings together all kinds of practitioners—counselors, social workers, special educators, regular ed teachers—interested in special education.

#titletalk: While there is no single hashtag being used to organize the thinking of media specialists, several use #title talk to spotlight regular weekly conversations with authors and to share interesting reads with one another. The #librarian and the #tlchat hashtags are also good sources for connecting with other teacher librarians.

#ntchat: If your school is anything like mine, you’ve probably got a bunch of new teachers that need guidance and support—and while they’re usually embedded on existing learning teams with experienced colleagues, sometimes having other new teachers to listen to and outside voices to learn from can make the first years of a teacher’s career feel a little less lonely. That’s why connecting with peers who use the #ntchat hashtag in Twitter makes so much sense.

The lesson to be learned from this list of Twitter hashtags is that there are always other singletons using Twitter to connect with one another. With a bit of browsing through each of these conversations, you’re sure to immediately find resources—and more importantly, digital colleagues—that can help you to improve your practice.
Blueprint for Building a Professional Learning Team

The first step to building a productive professional learning team is to paint a detailed picture of what you are and what you hope to become. Use this worksheet to track your thinking during the course of today’s session.

**What do we want to build?**
*Describe what your ideal learning team would look like in action. What would you be doing together? How would your meetings run? What tasks would you prioritize? Why?*

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**What does the site currently look like?**
*What is happening on your learning team right now? Who are the stakeholders who are involved in the work that you are doing together? What basic expectations do your administrators have for every professional learning team? Which expectations will be easy to meet? Which will be more difficult to pull off?*

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Who else is on this job?
Who shares my vision? Who has the time and energy to be a partner? What in-house support is available to learning teams in your building? What professionals working beyond the classroom—either at the school or the district level—can be tapped to help with organizing the work of your learning team? How can they help?

What do we already have in our PLT toolkit for this project?
What specific credentials, skills, contacts, experiences, and resources will the members of your learning team be able to contribute or procure to ensure that your PLC succeeds? Do individual members of your team have specific skills to contribute? How can you leverage the skills of individuals to move your team forward?
**What is this project going to cost?**
How much time and energy will we have to invest to make our team successful? Will our students have to “pay” in loss of time and attention? What strains might there be on our professional relationships? What risks could emerge to our professional reputations? Is there an actual dollar cost that will need to be paid?

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**What is our building schedule?**
How long will it take to build to the outcome we envision? How will we measure progress? What intermediary deadlines could we set? Are there outside deadlines we’re responsible for meeting?

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**What will be our first step and when will we take it?**

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Changing Structures
to Engage Singletons in a PLC
The Story of White Pine Middle School

By Aaron Hansen, principal
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Often traditional schools create structures that promote isolation. When I came to White Pine Middle School in rural Nevada five years ago, we had the structure of singletons—one teacher was teaching all of the sixth-grade math classes, one teacher was teaching all of seventh-grade math classes, and so on. This was a sadly repeating pattern—one teacher teaching one subject at one grade level—in every subject area.

What’s interesting is that while we had consensus that we wanted to follow the tenets of a professional learning community, our current structure, which left teachers to work alone, did not allow teachers to have meaningful collaboration based on common assessments. We had discussions and heated debates about whether our vision of becoming a PLC was just hyperbole. Were we really committed to doing what was best for kids?

After several meaningful conversations, our teachers agreed to a significant change in structure. They agreed to go from teaching one grade level in their subject area to teaching at least one class in each grade level in their subject area. While that instantly enabled teachers to collaborate with peers around common assessments and content, it also meant that teachers used to having one class to prepare for now had to prepare for three.

At first, this was a difficult adjustment for teachers because of the increase in preparation time—there’s never enough time in schools. Since then, however, we have seen tremendous growth in student learning because teachers who were once singletons are now studying their practice with peers, identifying and then amplifying the instructional strategies that work.
Another advantage of our structural change is that it has become far easier to vertically align our curriculum. We can no longer blame the grade-level teacher below for not teaching what should have been taught. We are all a part of the same team that collectively is accountable for student learning in our content areas.

A final advantage is that we have mitigated the impact that any one teacher might have on the whole school. Before the switch, a weak sixth-grade math teacher was responsible for instructing every sixth grader at White Pine Middle. The impact of his struggles on our students and our school’s testing results could be devastating. Taking a year or more for those students catch up leaves the school with little chance of making AYP in math for two to three years.

Now, that weak sixth-grade math teacher has peers to lean on. He can learn from the results of common assessments. He can observe important lessons and pick up important strategies that he may never have known. He can make choices based on something more than his own knowledge. Instead, he’s making choices based on the knowledge and expertise of his team.

Although there have been many obstacles to overcome to become a true PLC, we have seen tremendous academic growth because we had that hard conversation about the challenges we were willing to make to our traditional structures.

(More of WPM’s story can be found at allthingsplc.info in “Evidence of Effectiveness.”)
Finding the Common Denominator
on Interdisciplinary Teams
The Story of White Pine High School

By Adam Young, principal
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The professional learning communities approach (a collaborative focus on learning with the yardstick for success being the results obtained) resonates with so many educators right off the bat. Sometimes, however, making it happen in your school can seem overwhelming. This is especially true when your school, at first glance, appears significantly different from other schools.

The White Pine High School team that attended a Solution Tree Professional Learning Communities at Work™ Institute during the summer 2004 felt this way. While the philosophies, strategies, and suggestions made at the event resonated with all who attended, we quickly ran into some problems.

Most problems stemmed from the fact that being a small school (420 students), we found it difficult to adopt the common assessment framework so important to PLCs because there was only one teacher of English 9, one teacher of Biology 1, one teacher of Geometry, and so on. Since the “focus on learning” questions are centered on common assessments (What do we want our students to learn? How will we know when they’ve learned? What will we do when students do not learn?), we struggled to understand how to adapt this framework with limited numbers of job-alike teachers to collaborate.

However, we felt strongly enough about the benefits associated with collaboratively focusing on learning that we decided to learn by doing. We formed content teams as most schools do in English, math, social studies, science, career and technical education, fine arts, and foreign language.

Even though the teachers on these teams taught multiple singleton courses, the teachers developed common essential outcomes for their classes. Rather than being content driven, the essential outcomes focused on the common skills that students were expected to learn while in the classes taught by the teachers on the team.
For example, the social studies team developed essential outcomes such as “Students will read and interpret historical text by inferring, predicting, drawing conclusions, and formulating questions” and “Students will relate situations in the past to situations today.” The fine arts team developed essential outcomes like “Students will communicate to their audience using expression.” The career and technical education team developed essential outcomes that stated “Students will demonstrate employability skills through effective communication, work habits, and problem solving.”

These common skills based on essential outcomes allowed teachers to then craft common assessments that addressed students’ levels of proficiency and progression. In English classes, for example, the common assessment focused on persuasive writing, a skill that all members of the English team felt was important. Rather than being a content-based assessment that gauged students’ progress in a specific course, the common assessment measured all students’ persuasive writing progress.

This allowed the English team to engage in the dialogue that occurs as a result of the common assessment approach—asking questions like “What are we going to do with our struggling writers? Why did the students in this class outperform all of the others? What strategies did my colleagues use to promote student success on the assessment? How can we stretch the students who have already demonstrated proficiency?”

An analogy that helped us understand how to focus on what we did have in common stemmed from the math team. When math students try to add fractions, they must find the least common denominator. With such a small staff, it was not possible to have true collaboration among all of the world history teachers (there’s only one!). So we had to find the least common denominator among world history, U.S. history, government, and other social studies courses.

Once this least common denominator was found and we understood what we had in common, we could collaborate about learning in meaningful ways. It has also allowed teachers, who sometimes felt their content was sacred, to focus on skills that are in alignment with our school-improvement plan and our mission of helping students prepare for life in the real world.

(Retrieved from allthingsplc.info/wordpress/?p=977 on June 11, 2011.)
Mr. Mothershead and Advanced Placement Statistics

By Robert Eaker, Solution Tree author and professor, Department of Educational Leadership, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, Tennessee

and

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One of the most frequently asked questions we hear is, “I am the only one teaching this course. How can I be part of a collaborative team?” This question has been addressed numerous times in previous blogs, yet the uncertainty remains pervasive. We think the following story from the White River High School in Buckley, Washington, is a stellar example of how a singleton can be a contributing member of a collaborative team.

Since embarking on the journey to become a high-performing professional learning community, White River High School staff members have initiated a number of measures to stretch the aspirations and performance levels of their students. They have encouraged all students to undertake a more rigorous and challenging curriculum. The faculty has also made a commitment to provide additional time and support to assist students in being successful in their courses. This cultural shift is having a remarkable effect. In the 2008–2009 academic year, the number of students taking advanced placement (AP) courses has nearly tripled, and the number of AP courses offered has increased each year.

Statistics, one of the new AP courses, is taught by Cody Mothershead. Since Cody is the only person teaching this new course, one of the challenges facing him is obvious: “With whom do I collaborate? How can I be a contributing member of a collaborative team when I am the only person teaching this course?” Cody realized that although he would continue to be an active member of the math team, he would have to be creative in his approach to teaming with other AP statistics teachers.
Reaching Out

White River is the only comprehensive high school in the White River School District. However, Buckley, Washington, is only one of a number of small towns and communities located south of Seattle, near Mt. Rainier. Since he is the only AP statistics teacher in the White River School District, Cody decided to find out if there was an AP statistics teacher in a nearby district. Luckily, Cody located a teacher in Enumclaw, a district that borders White River.

After initially interacting by Internet and then by telephone, Cody and his counterpart in Enumclaw met in person. They quickly realized that meeting face-to-face on a regular basis would be beneficial. They agreed to meet monthly to share ideas, learning activities, and materials. Cody said that it is amazing how much support he feels with these interactions. When they first met, Cody got information about pacing, what kids struggle with on the AP exam, and techniques to help get the information across to students.

The AP statistics teacher from Enumclaw mentioned that he knew of an AP statistics teacher in the Sequim School District. They agreed to invite him to collaborate as well. Cody also communicates with an AP statistics teacher that he met at the summer AP training. He is an experienced AP statistics teacher in Maine who, in addition to teaching the course for a number of years, serves as a reader of AP exams.

Cody contacted this teacher and he proved to be most helpful, especially in terms of curricular emphasis and the development of a pacing guide. More important, the teacher in Maine agreed to stay in touch with the Washington group and help in any way he could. The teacher in Maine also uses the same textbook as Cody. This teacher is able to guide him on what needs to be emphasized for the exam, and what is perhaps overemphasized in the book.

Cody will tell you that he is amazed at how effective connecting electronically can be for a team.

Cody’s situation as the only teacher teaching a course or subject is not unusual. Obviously, there are many teachers who happen to be the only teacher of a particular course or subject. However, Cody’s response to his situation is instructive.
First, Cody took action.

Although Cody wasn’t exactly sure what to do or what the results might be, he decided to reach out and locate other AP statistics teachers. The point is this: Sometimes we try to have a perfect solution to the teaming issue before we go forward. Cody did not know where his inquiries would lead, but he got started and good things began to happen.

Second, Cody focused on the right things.

Cody’s primary motivation was not to become a member of a team, but to learn ways to become a more effective AP statistics teacher and to improve the learning levels of his students. Rick DuFour reminds us in his presentations on collaborative teaming that there is a huge difference between co-blabbering and co-laboring. Cody developed a team for all the right reasons. He found others with whom he could co-labor.

Third, Cody and his partners set a schedule in order to collaborate on a regular basis.

Cody did much more than connect with another teacher who happened to be teaching the same course. He desired regular communication, so he and his partners set a specific schedule for ongoing conversations. Occasionally, a teacher may seek out another teacher with whom to collaborate, but after an initial conversation or Internet exchange, the relationship declines. Let’s face it, teachers are very busy, and unless plans are developed for regular collaboration, the quality of the collaborative efforts will be iffy at best.

Fourth, Cody will continue to seek out others with whom to collaborate.

While it is admirable that Cody has developed a team with teachers from Enumclaw, Sequim, and Maine, he realizes that the status quo is never enough. He will continue to seek other teachers with whom he can learn and share. Cody is a perfect example of the idea, “Get started, and then get better!”

Fifth, Cody set the example for other singletons at White River.

As we mentioned earlier, how to be part of a collaborative team is a pervasive issue. Cody is not the only singleton in White River. He serves as an excellent example to others who feel that “I cannot be part of a collaborative team since
I’m the only one teaching this course.” In short, Cody demonstrates that it can be done.

There is no right way to form collaborative teams. There are many creative teachers who collaborate in creative ways. The central point is that much is to be learned when the traditional barriers of teacher isolation are broken down. Perhaps the more important point is this: Not only do teachers benefit from meaningful collaboration, but ultimately the learning levels of students are impacted in a positive way.

(Retrieved from allthingsplc.info/wordpress/?p=81 on June 11, 2011)
“You’ve Got Mail:”
Thinking Outside the Singleton Box

By Tim Brown, PLC at Work™ associate
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Missouri’s Rolla High School serves 1,500+ students in grades 10–12. Rolla’s freshmen learn at an offsite freshman center. After attending several Professional Learning Communities at Work™ institutes, the school staff committed to a three-year PLC training effort conducted by the Heart of Missouri Regional Professional Development Center based in Columbia.

The school had instituted a one-hour early release on Wednesdays for collaboration purposes. Because of the size of the school, most teachers were able to collaborate with at least one other teacher from their subject area. These teams focused on the four critical questions of the Professional Learning Communities at Work™ model, developed SMART goals based on common assessment data and provided timely interventions as a team. As with most schools, however, teachers from various fields struggled to find a common focus with another teacher that could serve as a source of meaningful collaboration during weekly early release times.

After reviewing intervention programs from other high schools, including Adlai E. Stevenson in Lincolnshire, Illinois (one of the nation’s leading schools in the adoption of a PLC process), Rolla’s principal met with several singletons to discuss forming an intervention team. Using their collaborative time, they would create an intervention problem for tenth graders who came with failing grades from the ninth-grade school. The singleton teachers discussed what the work of the team could look like during their early-release time and began to formulate ideas of how the four critical questions of the PLC process could be linked to their intervention program.

They answered the first question, “What do we want our students to know and be able to do?” by establishing expectations for academic success. The second question, “How will we know if they have learned it?” was defined by grade-point averages above 2.0. The third question “What will we do it they don’t?” was built around addressing individual student needs through monitoring classwork and directly addressing effort invested in learning. The
fourth question, “What will we do when they do learn?” created opportunities for the team to reinforce student successes.

Any incoming tenth grader with a GPA below 2.0 was identified for and enrolled in an intervention program. Each student was assigned to a member of this special singleton team. Along with counselors, the team included vocal music, instrumental music, drama, special education, health, physical education, and art teachers. Calling themselves the “You’ve Got Mail” team, these teachers made regular contact with their incoming tenth graders through the internal student mail system. Before the school year started, each student received a welcoming email that served as an introduction to their mentor and to the “You’ve Got Mail” program. Paired with regular face-to-face contact, email messages were sent regularly throughout the school year to encourage students to do well and offer a helping hand when needed.

Working like their more traditional colleagues, the “You’ve Got Mail” team wrote a SMART goal that was designed to increase the success rate of students who came to Rolla High with failing grades. When the team met during early release time, they discussed the progress of “You’ve Got Mail” students and monitored trends in homework, tests, quizzes, grades and attendance. Team members would share strategies that were helping turn their students around as well as strategies that weren’t working. The team investigated ideas and programs for student motivation and engagement. They also shared their findings and suggestions with the core teachers of their assigned students. They believed that they could help students change patterns of failure and begin to see themselves as capable of success.

The efforts of this team were recognized at the end of the third quarter when they hosted a celebration with the “You’ve Got Mail” students and their parents. Every student had improved their GPA to above 2.0, with some boosting their GPAs to as high as 3.5. The team, driven by data, surveyed their mentees to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their program. They wanted to know why the students thought they were more successful as tenth graders than they had been in the past. The overwhelming response from the students was simply that there seemed to be another adult in the school who really cared about how they did, encouraged them to do well, and challenged them to succeed.
Did this team hold true to the big ideas of the Professional Learning Community at Work™ process?

They focused on learning, worked collaboratively to address an identified need, and were accountable to each other and to the students assigned to their program. They developed, implemented, and monitored progress towards a measurable SMART goal. They were engaged in collective inquiry, were action oriented, and were driven by student data. Most importantly they helped students develop a sense of self-efficacy that led to unparalleled success.

In the end, that’s exactly what professional learning communities are all about!
## Reflecting on Singleton Solutions

The most important lesson to learn from the stories of White Pine Middle School, White Pine High School and AP Statistics teacher Cody Mothershead is *there is no right way to form collaborative teams*. Spend a few minutes using this handout to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of each of the solutions we’ve explored today.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Your Responses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What can you learn from this particular singleton solution? Will aspects of it resonate with your teachers? Can it be implemented easily? Does it build on practices that your teams, teachers, and schools are already comfortable with?</td>
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<td>If you were to change something about this particular singleton solution, what would it be? Why would this change be important for the teachers on your team or in your schools?</td>
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<td>Would your changes require permissions from supervisors? Would they require changes in school or district policies or practices?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What new skills and/or supports would teachers need in order to implement this singleton solution successfully?</td>
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Resources and References


