Peer Collaboration

Practitioner collaboration and peer review are intended to enhance the education profession by providing educators opportunities to boost their practice through structured interaction with a focus on instruction.

In an effort to ensure and support regular and timely collaboration, Iowa Code section 284.6(8) requires that at least 36 hours annually “outside of the minimum school day,” during “non-preparation time or designated professional development time,” must be used by “practitioners to collaborate with each other” or “to engage in peer review” activities. The collaboration or review time is not to be confused with individual educator preparation time, and schools should not count individual preparation time as collaboration time.

Another distinguishing element of the practitioner collaboration intended by this legislation is heavy reliance on the use of “one-to-one” or “many-to-many” collaborations among educators. It is expected that there is an authentic interaction among educators focused on instructional matters within their schools, buildings, or districts. The professional learning intended by Iowa Code section 284.6(8) actively involves the educators. The professional learning intended here is self-, peer-, or team-directed and active in nature.

To best understand what practitioner collaboration might look like in a school/district setting, let’s think about it as a theory of action:

If practitioners collaborate in a constructive and meaningful way by:
• focusing on improving teaching and student learning;
• meeting regularly with thoughtfully planned agendas, minutes, and concise follow-up actions;
• planning lessons, practicing lessons, debriefing lessons;
• organizing, analyzing, and summarizing data to plan instruction; solving problems related to student learning; reading, reflecting, and sharing articles that support learning goals…

And
…school leaders monitor, support, and participate in the collaborative process to ensure that efforts are focused on student learning and on district and building goals…

Then teaching and student learning will improve!
A peer review is of high quality when …

Practitioners develop ownership of the teaching practice and move toward making its discussion and improvement more visible within the school community.

A group of professionals are analyzing, reflecting upon, and talking about their profession in an attempt to make it better.

Teachers are assisted and supported in enhancing their effectiveness.

Collective accountability and responsibility for teaching and learning is established.

Attention is given to the art and craft of teaching and assisting the good teacher to become better.

Districts use their evaluation framework as a basis for discussion, support, and planning – but peer review is not intended to inform the summative evaluation. It is intended to be an element of coaching with a focus on improvement.

The review is reflective in nature by both the teacher and the reviewer around the teaching practice – openly sharing strengths, limitations, observations, etc. Reviewers should make thoughtful judgments about a teacher’s practice and consider each educator individually.

Peer Review

Under Iowa Code section 284.8(1), school districts are required to conduct annual, rather than every third year, reviews of non-probationary teacher performance. The first and second years of such reviews will be “conducted by a peer group of teachers.” The Iowa General Assembly specifically prohibited peer reviews from being used as the basis for recommending that a teacher be placed in an intensive assistance program. As such, the peer review is intended for the purposes of coaching and improvement.

Consider another theory of action, this time related to peer review:

*If peer reviews are conducted by a peer group of teachers who:*
  - incorporate continuous feedback loops focused on improving instructional practices;
  - focus on individualized coaching and support;
  - engage teachers in self- and peer-reflections…

*And*
  - teachers and peers know what information is expected of them and how the information will be used;
  - receive adequate training on the peer review process that is fair, linked to the Iowa Teaching Standards (or subsequently developed standards), and involves authentic and open discussions about the teaching practice;
  - confidentiality is maintained between the reviewer, the teacher, and the administrator;
  - peer review involves multiple authentic sources of data - classroom visits, review of course materials, and a balanced inclusion of student outcomes;
  - engages the teacher and the reviewer in an individualized and valuable discourse about the practice;
  - incorporates the teacher’s professional development plan for edits, revisions, or updates…

**Then teachers will openly examine their teaching practices for the purpose of self-improvement and to improve their teaching effectiveness!**