

# COLLABORATIVE AND CO-TEACHING PRACTICES AND REFLECTIONS IN A SECONDARY SCHOOL SETTING

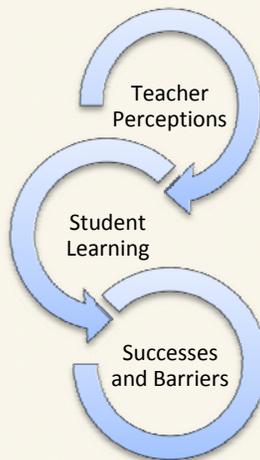
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## CHALLENGING THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO GRADE 9

In most Saskatchewan urban communities, elementary school is organized from Kindergarten to Grade 8 and secondary school is organized from Grade 9 to 12. As a result, problems have been identified in the transition from Grade 8 to Grade 9 (Saskatchewan Indicators Report, 2010). This seems to imply that high schools need to be restructured to engage our middle year's students. The traditional organization of a high school with its regimented schedule and lack of connection with students does not facilitate authentic engagement and learning (Cuban, 2001; Kirkpatrick & Peck, 2001; Daniels, Bizar, & Zemelman, 2001). King, Warren, King, Brook, and Kocher (2009) found that a successful year in Grade 9 was a strong predictor of high school completion. However, despite these findings, the way high school for Grade 9 has been organized has remained relatively constant in most cases. Interested in making high school more engaging and authentic for Grade 9 students, the high school in this case study developed an approach to Grade 9 programming and planning that restructured the schedule, reduced the number of teachers for Grade 9 students, integrated curricula, differentiated learning strategies, and imbedded collaborative teaching opportunities.



*Working between the lines and pushing the borders of traditional practice:*



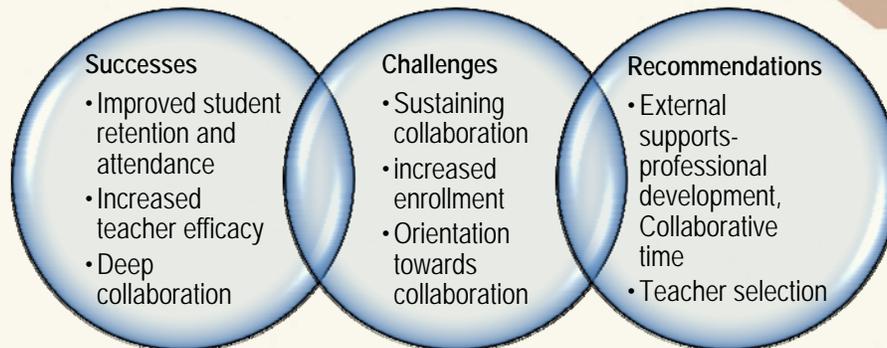
### ***Teacher Voices and Perceptions***

This case study examines the collaborative and co-teaching experiences and reflections of secondary school teachers in a Saskatchewan urban high school setting. Our research examined:

1. How co-teachers perceived their roles in the context of a Grade 9 collaborative grouping;
2. How co-teaching and collaborative planning impact student learning;
3. What successes and barriers during this experience inform future practice, supports, and organizational considerations?

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## FINDINGS

Initial findings indicate a number of successes. Central themes that have emerged thus far include:

### Successes:

1. Improved student retention, improved attendance, and earlier detection of student learning needs.
2. Reduced sense of teacher isolation, and increased sense of teacher efficacy. Collaboration was found effective in reducing teacher isolation. Teachers felt they were able to take risks, experiment with assessment for learning techniques, improve evaluation, and learn about new curriculum. Teachers reported a deeper understanding of curricula when collaborating with teachers outside of their specialty area.
3. In some cases, teachers moved from superficial collaboration to deeper collaboration where roles blurred. Deeper collaboration was dependent on trust, philosophical alignment, agreement on teaching goals and instructional techniques, and recognized experience and knowledge in the particular subject area.

### Continuing Challenges

1. Finding time and sustaining energy for collaboration. While teachers found collaboration rewarding, they wondered whether they could sustain the energy required for planning and meeting into a second year.
2. Responding to on-going and increasing enrolments of the most needy students. Although there were substantial promising results in meeting student learning needs, teachers and administrators struggled to meet the needs of ongoing enrolment of students throughout the school year.
3. Consistency in staff members with common beliefs in collaboration and integration.

### Recommendations

1. External supports not only for release time, but for continued guidance in how to interpret and integrate new Grade 9 curricula.
2. For collaboration to be successful, teachers need some foundation of knowledge that they feel adept in and identify with. Teachers felt more comfortable when they perceived themselves as an expert of sorts in some area whether it was a subject specialist or an expert in supporting a specific type of student.

This study is important for educational research, teachers, policy makers, and school divisions investing in collaborative and co-teaching practices at the secondary level. This research gives teacher perceptions and reflections on how changing the traditional structure and increasing collaboration in a high school resulted in successes and ongoing challenges