



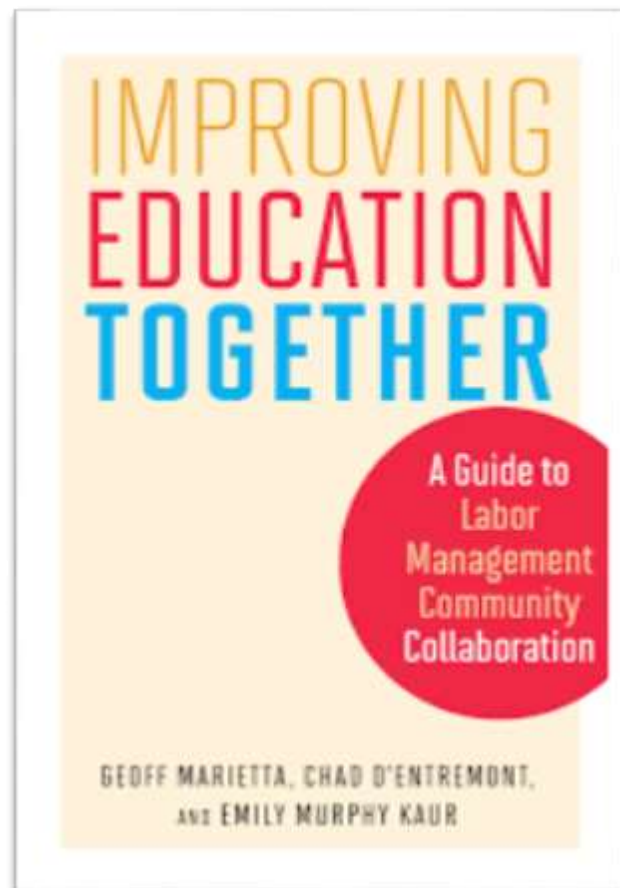
Marietta, G., D'Entremont, C. & Murphy Kaur, E. (2017). *Improving education together: A guide to labor, management, and community collaboration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

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Improving education together: A guide to labor, management, and community collaboration (LMC) is a guidebook for improving the communication processes needed to get better educational outcomes for students. It was written to provide processes and tools for school districts seeking to approach academic achievement from a holistic perspective and in ways that include all stakeholders. This book is relevant, as budgetary resources are consistently strained and expectations for academic improvement are steadily increasing (Turner & Spain, 2016). School boards, county leaders, and local businesses can use this book to develop a working plan that will enrich students' achievement through inclusive community processes. Because the results of increased academic achievement will enhance the community as a whole, approaching it together makes sense. The authors of this foundational book address the process of coming together to create a common definition of collaboration, set of goals, guidelines for participation, and approach to the process. They also provide suggestions for handling collaborations that go off course, for instance, changes in



leadership, funding, or team members. Finally, real life examples of districts that have tried and succeeded or experienced challenges are shared from the participants' standpoints.

Don't let the small size of this book fool you. *Improving Education Together* is full of big ideas about approaching educational improvement from a collaborative perspective. Along with this concept comes detailed strategies and practical, useful forms for the user. The book is dense, in a good way. As I read it, I frequently stopped to make notes, analyze my school district's scenario, and continually add to the list of names receiving my recommendation to read this book, which comes with heavy weight as a librarian, especially since we are often tasked with locating resources on myriad topics.

This book highlights the necessity of LMC collaboration as communities work toward a common goal of supporting academic achievement for all students. Recognizing that collaboration has differing meanings, depending on the context and users, the text clearly defines collaboration as, "a process by which stakeholders who see parts of a problem differently can explore these differences and construct solutions that are better than what they could have come up with on their own" (p. 2). Following this definition, the authors presented methods and suggested tools for the hard work of collaborating across groups of stakeholders that come into the process with different agendas, skills, and points of view. An example of a new, realistic concern comes from school districts that have decided to implement an individualized learning program with 1:1 devices. Though everyone has student academic achievement as the primary goal, the approach to reaching that goal is different from each stakeholder's perspective. The school division may see technology as a way to provide equity, while parents have concerns about their children's technology usage. Both share the same goal, student success, with

differing and potentially conflicting viewpoints. The authors provide multiple entry points for the LMC teams to access the collaborative process, with examples of best-case scenarios and potential pitfalls. As a best-case scenario, Baltimore City schools were able to improve student outcomes using the five factors of successful collaboration: interdependence, joint solutions, ownership in decisions, accountability for outcomes, and dynamism (refers to the dynamic nature of problem solving) – with participation from approximately 66 schools. On the other hand, Leominster Public Schools enjoyed a successful inaugural year, but began to experience challenges during their second year with a critical leadership change. Coupled with a change in the team's working culture, this resulted in a reduction in collaborative efforts.

Today's culture of constant school reform causes many frustrations among stakeholders (Heyd & Sawyer, 1997). The heart of improving achievement is change, which is one of the most difficult processes that people have to go through (Dolph, 2017). In my experience, the mere act of carefully selecting groups and establishing norms does not necessarily mean that people are able to come to the table with a clean slate and work towards change. The authors recommend "learning fast to implement thoroughly" as a strategy, rather than the common practice of "implementing fast and learning slow." The Implementation Science model, to which their philosophy refers, consists of four stages: plan, do, study, act. After personally participating in several frequent culture and reform shifts, I suspect this strategy is one that will resound with some readers.

The included data on needs assessment not only helps school districts determine their readiness to begin a project of this nature, but it may also serve as a catalyst for initiating collaboration as their mechanism for improving student outcomes. However, as districts look for additional data to inform

their practice and future decision-making, it would be helpful to include a process on how to measure the project goals. As a result, districts will be able to create metrics for measurement in tandem with their goal development, which will allow them to evaluate the success of their newly implemented strategies from the beginning.

The team forming, building, and working processes are outlined in great detail. According to the authors, the team's makeup will be determined "as a function of the process" and all team members "will have a say in the process." Because everyone on the team is not well versed in instructional best practices, potential problems may arise with regard to the feasibility of implementation. It would be helpful if this book presented a methodical way to deal with the feasibility of classroom implementation. Specific, non-emotional dialogue practice examples would be helpful for exchanges that are emotional, e.g., ideas that sound great to non-practitioners, but present unrealistic classroom expectations.

With all of the great information shared about including all of the stakeholders in the process, I have to ask, where are the kids? The authors address the adult stakeholders, but the primary benefactors of this improvement, the students, are not included. The next iteration of this book should include a section on the benefits and potential challenges of including students. The student voice is needed to assist in maintaining a sense of reality and balance since they understand what works for themselves and their friends. Including students as a stakeholder group requires additional preparation, as many of them have likely never had the opportunity to participate in discussions with stakes this high. They will gain experience in the civic process, communication, collaboration and leadership. A solid recommendation might include providing leadership and communication training to selected students.

Since the community plays such an important role in this process, it would be nice to see a few more specific details designed to facilitate their integration. For instance, a plan for introducing the community to the collaboration along with a selection process for community members should be considered. In order to develop and maintain community enthusiasm for the process, a clearly worded process should be included. Finally, this book needs to include a process on how to educate all stakeholders on educational jargon, in an unbiased manner, keeping the audience in mind. This section should be specific without being condescending to maintain open lines of communication.

This text would make a great introductory study for leaders of school districts or organizations looking to bridge, not only the academic achievement gap, but also the expectation gaps that exist between each of the stakeholders. The primary audiences for this book are school administrators, school board members, and active community leaders. However, the collaboration skills and tools presented in this text can be directly used by anyone working collaboratively as a team. Anyone who picks up this book will be empowered with step-by-step details describing the rationale and method for moving through the collaborative process. The idea of defining collaboration, establishing goals, and creating norms for group participation, at the inception of the group, are among best practices for successful team collaboration (Parker, 2008). However, in many cases, groups dive right in to the work and only stop when there is a breakdown in the process. Sadly, there is no opportunity to return to the blank slate that exists at the onset of the groups' project. Reading this book, and actually using it as a guide will help even K-12 students (guided by their teachers) experience more fruitful collaborative processes.

In my 12 years of experience as an educator and even more years as a student, the mere suggestion of collaboration elicits a cacophony of groans. However, this useful text is a substantial tool for improving the collaborative experience by preparing all stakeholders to work through the process together to improve the educational outcomes

of their community. The authors presented five elements of successful collaboration that will provide school districts with a blueprint for creating an atmosphere that provides students with a more productive learning experience – the ultimate goal for all stakeholders.

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