



It's our job to set the table

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As a kid, after mass and Sunday school, it was my job to set the table for Sunday dinner. Sometimes the crowd was small, just my parents and my grandmothers, but more often, setting the table meant a crowd of cousins, aunts, and uncles. I loved the quiet act of making a place for each person, setting down forks and knives in anticipation of the stories we would tell, the laughter we would share, and most importantly, the food we would eat. I learned how to listen, how to think deeply, how to ask questions and also how to navigate shared history and disagreements at my momma's table. Over the years, the people in the seats have passed on and grown older. We've made room for new people, but the feelings of anticipation and joy for gathering together remains the same.



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teachers can focus on setting up every student for success.**

The shared dinner table of my childhood had a lot in common with the many different tables I've been lucky enough to sit at as a career teacher, principal, and system leader. My worry is that in our rush to attend to all the responsibilities and dilemmas that educational leaders try to face on their own we've forgotten our real job. When we focus on setting up every teacher for success, teachers can focus on setting up every student for success. If educational leaders set the table by creating conditions where teachers can solve problems together with students, families, and administrators, teachers will seize the opportunity to help lead schools that do an amazing job of serving every student.

In 2020–21, **more than 4,600 teachers in South Carolina** decided not to return to the classroom. In 2021–22, that **number climbed above 5,000**. Of those teachers that left their positions, 35 percent had fewer than five years of experience. Although the COVID-19 pandemic and increases in teacher vacancies have spurred leaders to focus on the work of recruiting and retaining great talent, the research on recruitment and retention in education is very clear: the conditions and leadership inside a school are directly connected to the retention of teachers.

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In my second year of teaching, I had a rough first semester. I was struggling, my ninth grade English students were struggling, and one of my teacher heroes and confidants, a third year teacher, quit at the semester break. Riding out the semester and applying for “businessy” jobs sounded way less complicated than admitting there was no way I could figure out how to support students from 20 different middle schools who definitely weren’t feeling the love for John Steinbeck’s *Cannery Row*, my instruction, the school’s behavioral expectations, or honestly even one another. When I looked more closely at my gradebook, I was embarrassed to see that the students falling farthest behind were mostly from traditionally underserved populations: students with disabilities, multilingual learners, foster kids, and African American and Latino boys.

Fortunately, a member of my ninth grade team sat me down with a cup of coffee, gently listened to my concerns, and asked if leaving teaching was what I really wanted. It wasn’t. She took a breath and calmly reminded me that even if I was the only ninth grade English teacher I didn’t have to figure everything out on my own. We were collectively responsible for the success of our students, and my classroom wasn’t the only place some students were falling behind. She reminded me we had a talented team of ninth grade teachers who could sit down together to prioritize which students had specific needs. We would make a plan and move forward together.

Looking back, I can recognize that I didn’t fully appreciate all the support I had as a new teacher.

Our school

- ◆ paired new teachers with veteran mentors and observers for their first three years;
- ◆ ensured that students shared the same teachers and gave grade-level teams time to plan and collaborate together;
- ◆ designed a schedule to give departments shared planning time; and
- ◆ included every teacher in the leadership team that made decisions about curriculum, instruction, and school culture.





What these intentional structures all had in common were that they forced me to sit around tables with other educators and get clear about what was going well and what needed to change. These structures gave me multiple lifelines that pulled me away from drowning in the feeling I had to do it all on my own. Even if I didn't have the theoretical framework for it then, it's clear to me now that collective leadership was baked into my experience as a new teacher. Collective leadership was the reason I stayed in teaching.

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Many years later as a leader in the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE), watching a new generation of collective leadership schools keeps me passionate and optimistic about education. In 2016, the SCDE invited teachers and administrators from five districts to design a framework for teacher leadership. Because we intentionally designed the experience to get teachers and administrators around a table together, the framework they designed was grounded in their experience. They didn't need more skill building for teacher leaders or even more opportunities for teacher leaders to shine. They needed an occasion for teachers and administrators to learn how to lead together. That work has evolved into the [Collective Leadership Initiative](#).

In 2021–22, the Collective Leadership Initiative included 15 districts, seven of which have multiple schools participating. These 25 schools came to the table to work alongside SCDE and our partners at the [Center for Teaching Quality \(CTQ\)](#) to grow the impact of their collective leadership teams.

If your school or district is ready to focus on collective leadership, start small.

Take the small step of setting the table for one extra opportunity to invite in the voices of teachers, students, and families. You may be surprised when someone sits down and shares the solution you were looking for. If you are ready to make collective leadership a focus, we are excited to join you at that table and along every step if you want company for your school improvement journey.

This story is published as part of a recent storytelling retreat hosted by the [Office of Educator Effectiveness and Leadership Development \(OEELD\)](#) within the [South Carolina Department of Education](#). The [Center for Teaching Quality \(CTQ\)](#), an OEELD partner, facilitated the retreat and provided editorial and publication support. Learn more about this work and read additional stories by following [@EducationSC](#) and [@teachingquality](#).



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