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Collaborative Response.

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Introduction

A Call to Action

This book is not a silver bullet.

It is not a step-by-step guide for improving schools. It will not share a magic formula or a quick fix for school leaders to ensure high-quality learning and success for students. We recognize “the inherent dangers in efforts to simplify complex tasks” (DuFour, 1998, p. 57), and as a result, we embark with a full disclosure. This book introduces an approach that is simple in design but complex in execution. It is more than a little messy, . . . but it is an organizational framework that can have a profound impact on student success and educator collective efficacy!

What this book will do is examine what we call *Collaborative Response* and bring attention to basic tenets, elements, and ideas we have shared across schools and districts, beginning in our home province of Alberta, Canada, and extending beyond our provincial and national borders. Our goal is to help schools make sure that all students are engaged learners and that no child slips through the cracks, with educator expertise honored, maximized, and extended throughout the process. Traditional schools, in our experience, fit some children better than others. These fortunate students who fit our commonly understood mold of schooling are the benefactors of teaching, according to what Rose (2016) would refer to as “the hidden tyranny of the average” (p. 9). These children have found success in the past and will continue to succeed in traditional classroom models.

To truly achieve equity across all systems, we believe that all children deserve the best we have to offer. We know that teachers and schools do not purposely disregard some students; the teachers we know care that all children learn. Yet the individualistic teaching and learning models common to our schools create a system that makes individual and, often, isolated teacher responses to children’s needs either next to impossible or an exhausting personal martyrdom.

We believe that schools can and should change so that, as the old saying goes, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Or, in the case of schooling, we believe that the entire school should teach and raise up all learners. Here, we propose a model that we know can move us toward this goal.

Implementing the approach presented in this book will not make life in schools any less busy or demanding. In fact, as the culture of your school is addressed, articulated, and likely challenged through ideas and concepts we share here, things may get harder before they get better. Although “harder before better” is consistent with what we know about

engaging in meaningful change, it doesn't mean that some difficult discussions and resulting tensions are not part of the short-term forecast. By putting the needs of students at the forefront of school conversations, we will potentially place some long-held teaching practices and educational beliefs in direct conflict with traditional schooling. We will also raise some conversations perhaps left dormant out of a desire to avoid uncomfortable and challenging conversations.

The schoolwide approach presented in this book will place a direct focus on quality classroom instruction and, in time, an open conversation about what is not working and what we could try in order to see success for each and every child. Our experiences have shown that transitioning to a school-based Collaborative Response will result in a greater focus on students in the classroom, an increased individual teacher awareness of student needs, and powerful conversations that become the impetus for shifts in classroom teaching and learning. In time, it will bring together general and specialized approaches for all, with fewer learners needing to be moved to more intensive special education processes.

DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2010) remind us, "It would be a huge mistake to assume a system of interventions can solve the problems created by poor instruction occurring on a wide-scale basis. Schools need both skillful teachers and a system of interventions" (p. 256). Our experience working with schools and districts across Alberta and beyond has shown us repeatedly that the conversations and laser-like focus placed on students through Collaborative Response brings with it substantial shifts in individual teacher practice and collective communities of practice that recognize, reinforce, sustain, and celebrate highly impactful pedagogy. In short, this book will provide a systemic framework that consistently examines exceptional classroom learning, through the identification and response related to the needs of students, and will provide examples of schools that have successfully experienced the emergence of systemic, highly impactful classroom instruction, as well as schoolwide response, through the use of this approach.

Finally, although this text relies on and expands tenets of response to intervention (RTI), multitiered systems of support (MTSS), positive behavior intervention support, and other similar models, Collaborative Response is not synonymous with these approaches. They are not interchangeable. Shortly, we will examine the distinctive features that we believe set Collaborative Response apart from the contemporary tiered support models. Although several elements may be recognizable for leaders previously engaged in a typical three-tiered approach to supporting students, it is important to establish at the outset that this is not a book about establishing a system of multitiered support. What we are sharing is different.

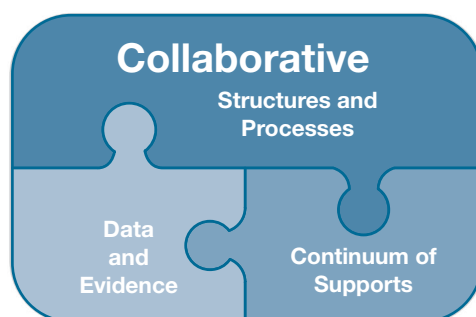
What This Book *Will* Do!

So, why begin with a disclaimer? We believe that it is important that readers engage with our text without any misconceptions about the book's purpose

or content. We recognize that school improvement and reform is an exhausting subject matter, susceptible to ever-changing educational movements and the latest “fad of the day.” However, we do feel that our work holds immense promise by providing a framework on which schools can build on their ongoing efforts, striving for and ensuring success for every child.

This book will share and dissect a schoolwide approach for addressing the individual needs of students, founded on equal portions of educational research and practical application. Our model has evolved for us in our own school experiences and subsequently deepened in our experiences working with other schools and districts throughout Alberta and abroad. This work has involved not only individual school conversations, but also districtwide frameworks to support effective school structures and processes. Throughout the text, we share examples from schools and districts that are framing their work in accordance with the foundational graphic shared in Figure I.1.

Figure I.1 Visual representation of Collaborative Response



This book will break down the three foundational components of this responsive framework, providing schools with resources, templates, and narrative examples that help your school or district purposefully and collectively respond to individual student needs. Because we recognize and celebrate the uniqueness of every school’s diverse community, we present Collaborative Response as a flexible framework, without strict adherence to specific features of each component. In other words, we believe that this approach provides a framework that helps each school create its own specific path toward Collaborative Response. This said, we strongly believe that all three components need to be established if schools are to provide the best possible set of structures and processes critical for student success. What each component looks like will be (and should be) unique to the context of each educational environment. We also recognize that we are not speaking to a specific geographical audience—we believe and have seen evidence that Collaborative Response can transcend multiple unique global approaches to education.

We also recognize (and have witnessed) the reality that establishing a responsive model into schools can be potentially fraught with high

tension, disillusionment, and considerable efforts at the outset. In short, some school cultures do not provide fertile ground in which a responsive model, such as the one presented in this book, will grow and flourish. We know that simply adding or revising structures won't have an impact on underlying culture. In fact, the superficial act of introducing a structure without changing the culture often gives organizations license to avoid problems that must be confronted and addressed (Collins, 2009).

Our collective work in schools has identified characteristics of traditional cultures focused on teaching or learning for *most* students and helped us recognize the shifts needed to establish a responsive model focused on truly achieving the aspiration of learning and success for *all* students. Simply stated, we believe that traditionally structured schools can no longer meet the diverse and varied needs of all students. As Buffum et al. (2012) point out,

We know one thing for certain: we are never going to get there doing what we have always done. Our traditional school system was created in a time when the typical educator worked in a one-room schoolhouse and served as the only teacher for an entire town. Today it is virtually impossible for a single teacher to possess all the skills and knowledge necessary to meet the unique needs of every child in the classroom. (p. 1)

We know and celebrate teachers who go above and beyond the call of duty for their children, working tirelessly to support and ensure success for all. Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) suggest, "It is impossible for even the most talented people to do competent, let alone brilliant, work in a flawed system" (p. 96). Our intention in this book is to establish the collective capacity to support the great day-to-day work of teachers happening in schools and ensure that it can be a reality throughout an entire system. *Our ultimate vision is to transform teaching from an isolated to a collective endeavor while supporting each and every child in our charge.*

This book also builds on the diverse research base and practical application of the diversity of thought flooding our educational landscape. It can be difficult for schools (and more specifically school leaders) to bridge educational thought and theory. Throughout this text, we bridge the findings of researchers and the work of educators with the practical structures, processes, and direction of Collaborative Response.

Finally, although the context in which we originally established our thinking was an elementary setting with a primary focus on literacy, the essential components of this model are relevant for all schools, regardless of size, location, grade focus, or subject area. We have helped schools utilize the framework with a focus on student behavior and social-emotional needs. We have seen its implementation make a difference for schools focusing on numeracy success for students. We have seen the model adapted in small rural schools with a wide range of grades and

combined classes and have helped large schools with multiple classes at each grade level. Junior high and senior high have successfully used our model to create flexible programs, with an unwavering focus on student success, and enhance student engagement. We are now seeing the impact of district initiatives and directions that subscribe to this framework of response, ensuring that support at the district level is ultimately driven by conversations centered on students at the school level. Throughout this book, we highlight some of these efforts and provide additional links and direction so your school can connect with others engaging in this fundamental work.

Essentially, our book is a call to action for schools and districts that want to make a difference for children. We hope to encourage educational leaders to honor current best practices while building new perspectives and insights about how schools can address success for all students. And, because we don't believe the work is done yet, we are encouraging you to join with us in building research-engaged schools that can respond quickly and effectively to children's needs as these needs present themselves.

We know that schools significantly affect student achievement and that the most effective schools can transcend the effect of student backgrounds (Marzano, 2003). Ultimately, we hope that this book will be a starting place for great conversations and cultural transitions, as schools work to become increasingly effective responders to the needs of *all* students.

What We Have Learned

Throughout our journey, we have definitely lived the mantra of “Ready, Fire, Aim.” As we have shared these ideas with hundreds of educators across the educational landscape, we have been learning alongside all our partners. Since we first self-published the concept of Collaborative Response (initially termed a *Collaborative Response Model*) in 2015, we have learned a lot from a number of exceptional educators and leaders, and it has deepened the understanding and implementation of the Collaborative Response approach. We have brought that learning into this text as a way of moving the literature to align with our current thinking. We are truly learners, excited to continue to extend and enrich our understanding of how systems can best structure themselves to ensure high levels of student success while attaining increasing levels of collective efficacy among the staff team. While some of the core concepts we explored in our first self-published book will be familiar for those who engaged with that text, there are a number of learnings that we have embedded throughout this text to reflect a deepening understanding that will and has been significantly transforming collective practice in schools. For those readers who previously engaged with the 2015 text, we hope that this book will provide a number of confirmations as well as a number of substantial shifts to truly deepen and extend the work.

Examining Our Core Beliefs

At the outset, it is important to share the core beliefs that serve to guide the discussion within this text and can serve as the foundation of Collaborative Response for schools and districts. Essentially, four core beliefs lie at the heart of our efforts to re-envision how schools and districts organize to collectively respond to students.

Core Belief 1: All Students Can Succeed

We believe that all children can learn and have success in our schools. This belief should ground any discussion about how education is organized and how schools are structured. Some variation of this statement appears in countless school authority mission statements and serves as a rallying cry for most educational initiatives. Sadly, as we discuss further in Chapter 1, the phrase may be present but is not always truly ingrained in schools. We have observed and worked in schools where the collective, long-standing policies and practices are actually counterproductive to this core belief—even as they post the words “all children can succeed” on their walls. However, as you will see throughout this book, we are unwavering in our goal that all students can learn and have success, although we recognize that success is going to look different for each learner. If we truly believe that all students can succeed, then it demands that we provide flexible responses and adaptive environments that allow students to succeed. We have to walk the talk. This philosophy must be both stated and lived at the core of any school or district’s Collaborative Response efforts.

Core Belief 2: Teachers Make the Greatest Impact on Student Learning

This belief acknowledges that classroom teachers ultimately know what is best for their students’ learning. Central to a Collaborative Response is the deep recognition that teachers’ professional judgments must be sought, honored, and thoughtfully accessed in any discussion about how to respond to students’ needs. Furthermore, because we believe that the school educates the child, we also believe that all other staff members working with students in schools must also weigh in on students’ needs. We believe that schools should seek and consider a diverse collection of insights from across the organization, from general and specialized teachers, thus living the mantra of “it takes a village to raise a child.”

Do we want to ensure success for our students? Listen to the professionals closest to the child and build on the priceless professional capital that exists in schools and that can be drawn on in thoughtful and timely ways. As we discuss in Chapter 5, schools simply cannot function unless we believe that teachers know their students best, that they develop deep and meaningful relationships that endure, and that they ultimately make the greatest impact on student success.

However, this core belief does not necessitate a blind or unquestioning reverence to “teacher knows best.” As we will explore throughout the text, the belief that teachers make the greatest impact is paralleled by the understanding that we are all learners and that, collectively, teachers are constantly learning throughout the process. Truly being professional means that we as teachers are constantly reflecting on our practice, seeking out additional insights or perspectives, challenging our assumptions and current pedagogy, and aspiring to improve each and every day. As we will see through a Collaborative Response approach, this becomes a collective process that is honed and deepened through each conversation about a student. Teachers make the greatest impact on student learning, but truthfully, *they may be the most affected as learners themselves through the process.*

Teachers make the greatest impact on student learning, but truthfully, they may be the most affected as learners themselves through the process.

Core Belief 3: Schools Cannot Achieve High Levels of Success When Adults Work in Isolation

Our second core belief actually becomes a detriment if those teachers who know best continue to work in isolation. Although this is not likely a factor that is within teachers’ control, it is an essential component that requires structures and processes envisioned and implemented by school or district leadership—a core belief to examine next. We believe that working together should be not just an aspiration but an organizational requirement. In Chapter 1, we examine rich, impactful collaboration in depth, discussing the educational paradigm shift that must happen if we truly desire a Collaborative Response to the diverse needs of our students. Collaboration is simply not a “nice to have;” it is a moral imperative that must be purposefully established in every school and school authority. However, it is critical to understand that we can’t wait until we have a collaborative culture before we begin to engage in this work. It is *through the work* that we come to learn and deeply recognize that teachers working in isolation is substantially inferior to us working together as a team.

Core Belief 4: Leadership Is Responsible for Ensuring Structures for Collaboration

Leadership in schools and districts has a critical role to play in the establishment of Collaborative Response. In fact, we would argue that Collaborative Response has limited impact for staff and students without a strong and intentional focus on the role and involvement of leadership. We believe that the number one priority for school and district leaders is to ensure that those working closest to students have the time and structures to collectively examine and collaboratively determine how best to respond to students’ needs. If how time is to be used is not strategically planned, Collaborative Response becomes just another burden on the already exhaustive role of the teacher and other professionals working

in our organizations. If leadership is not deeply involved in the work of Collaborative Response, it is not likely to take root in a school's organizational DNA.

Chapter Overview

Collaborative Response: Three Foundational Components That Transform How We Respond to the Needs of Learners is written for school and district leaders and those interested in restructuring educational systems to identify, respond to, and support learners and the teachers working with them.

There is good news. We are almost certain that elements of this framework are already in place in your organization. We encourage readers to take time to read through this text and thoughtfully consider where your school and school authority currently are in your journey and the next phases of implementation you should be pursuing, potentially using the resources we provide to assist with your evaluation and subsequent planning. The chapter structure will assist in this process.

Chapter 1, *Examining a Culture of Response*, starts by examining two schools. Each vignette shows a classroom teacher striving to make a difference for a student, but trying to accomplish it in two very different cultures of response. Chapter 1 sets the stage for the introduction of Collaborative Response by examining why a collaborative culture of response is critical when considering how best we can organize our efforts to ensure success for all.

Chapter 2, *Envisioning Collaborative Response*, provides an introduction to the student response framework explored in the remaining chapters. This chapter briefly reviews the foundational components that comprise Collaborative Response. Collaborative Response simultaneously complements but differs from contemporary RTI, MTSS, and other tiered response frameworks, and this chapter indicates what can result when any one of these foundational components is not present in schools. Chapter 2 examines the role of a Collaborative Response in an inclusive framework, focusing on how schools can ensure that structures and supports are in place to respond to unique student needs as well as supporting the needs of all learners through collaborative capacity building in ways that value an individual school's context and ultimately affects collective efficacy across the organization.

Chapter 3, *Collaborative Structures*, focuses on the first foundational component of Collaborative Response. To clearly articulate this complex component of Collaborative Response, we have intentionally dedicated three chapters to this explanation. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are dedicated to defining collaborative structures and processes in detail. As the visual implies, the collaborative structures (Chapter 3) and collaborative processes (Chapter 4) along with the collaborative team meetings (described in detail in Chapter 5) are the most important and impactful components of the model. Chapter 3 defines four foundational layers of

collaborative structures that pave the way for an inclusive system of supports where no child can fall through the cracks:

- ▶ Case consult team meetings
- ▶ School support team meetings
- ▶ Collaborative team meetings
- ▶ Collaborative planning time

Chapter 4, *Collaborative Processes*, expands on the belief that teams are only as successful as the processes that they have defined to guide their practice. Essential to the functioning of each team and the communication between teams are the consistent, clearly articulated processes that will be described in this chapter, which include:

- ▶ Team meeting norms
- ▶ Team meeting agendas
- ▶ Celebrations
- ▶ Defined involvement
- ▶ Roles
- ▶ Action focused
- ▶ Meeting space

Chapter 5, *Collaborative Team Meetings*, is central to a school's Collaborative Response and capitalizes on the collective knowledge and expertise of adults in schools, with a laser-like focus on student needs, identified through key issues and resulting actions. In essence, Chapter 4 embodies what Mike Schmoker writes in the foreword to Richard DuFour and his associates' text, *Whatever It Takes*: "What schools most need now [is] to begin harnessing the power of collective intelligence that already resides in the school to solve problems" (DuFour et al., 2004, p. xiii). If Collaborative Response is the vehicle that drives the school forward, the collaborative team meeting is its engine. This chapter will highlight the processes that are essential to collaborative team meetings and that make this level of team a unique and essential element of providing a Collaborative Response. Nine key elements for collaborative team meetings will be explored:

1. Maximum adult involvement
2. Focus and timeline for meetings
3. Pre-meeting processes
4. Defined roles

5. Team norms
6. Meeting agenda and notes
7. Celebrations
8. Focus on key issues
9. Action focused

Chapter 6, *Data and Evidence*, describes the critical role that the identification of universal screens, diagnostic assessments, and progress monitoring assessments play and the intentional organization of data that can effectively provide evidence to inform conversations. This is the second foundational component of Collaborative Response. Common schoolwide assessments provide a shared language essential for successful collaborative conversations and collective problem solving, which can augment the relational knowledge that we hold for students within our care. Assessments are no longer used to sort and classify children but to help teachers “inform and improve their practice and respond to the needs of their students” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010, p. 10), essentially “flagging” students to focus on first in the collaborative team meetings and then potentially in subsequent structures. The data provided are important, but how that evidence is organized, accessed, and then used is absolutely critical. Rather than focusing on implementing specific assessment tools, using the assessment data wisely becomes the emphasis in Collaborative Response. Nine key elements of the data and evidence component are defined and discussed:

1. Flag students for discussion
2. Universal screens
3. Diagnostic assessments
4. Progress monitoring assessment
5. Assessment schedule established
6. Intentional organization of results for team analysis
7. Intentional organization of results for collaborative team meeting
8. Student entry level
9. Data-informed planning

Chapter 7, *Continuum of Supports*, focuses on answering the third critical question of a professional learning community: “How will we respond to students who aren’t learning?” (Eaker et al., 2002, p. 12). This chapter articulates the importance of establishing a multitiered framework of supports and stresses the need for schoolwide articulation

and identification of interventions, strategies, and accommodations to be accessed when responding to the individual needs of students. This framework must be shaped by each school's unique context and organized to support students with increasing levels of intensity and intervention. Essentially, when we ask the critical and empowering question, "So what should we do?", in reference to a student's identified needs, the continuum of supports should provide a starting place for a response. Nine key elements will be shared to guide schools and school leaders in developing their own continuum of supports:

1. Honor current practices in areas of focus
2. Articulation of tiers of support
3. Articulation of interventions, strategies, and accommodations
4. Development of a menu of supports
5. Intentional utilization in team meetings
6. Refinement of Tier 1 instruction
7. Inform professional learning
8. Connection to visual team board
9. Alignment with collaborative structures and processes

Chapter 8, *Putting the Pieces Together*, simultaneously concludes the book and signals new beginnings as schools work to realize their own Collaborative Response framework for meeting students' needs. Three final thoughts for school communities are explored, with a closing message of hope for all those dedicated to ensuring success for all learners.

Features of the Book

Throughout the text, a number of features are included to assist schools and provide further insights and reflections:

- **Starting Steps:** These sidebars and connected interjections share potential first steps to consider when just getting started. They provide initial entry points, so that leaders can establish specific aspects of Collaborative Response.
- **Potential Pitfalls:** These notes for leaders are related to potential hazards to consider and potentially avoid. These hazards are based on our experiences working in and with schools to plan, establish, and sustain a Collaborative Response approach.
- **Recommended Resources:** A number of templates and resources are shared throughout the text and are available through our

accompanying online Companion Website. Information about accessing and navigating the Companion Website is shared below.

- ▶ *In the Field:* Throughout the text, thoughts and ideas from schools and districts that are working to establish and refine their own Collaborative Response will be shared. These offerings are not intended to define “how it should be done” but rather offer illustrative examples of what the components of Collaborative Response can look like in a variety of unique contexts and organizations.
- ▶ *Substantial Shifts:* Over the past number of years, we’ve engaged in deep learning related to Collaborative Response as we’ve engaged with hundreds of schools and districts establishing the framework. These sections will identify shifts we’ve made in our thinking in relation to Collaborative Response that we consider substantial to early iterations of the framework shared in our 2015 self-published text, *Envisioning a Collaborative Response Model*.

Accessing Additional Samples and Resources



<http://jigsawlearning.ca/collaborative-response>

To read a QR code, you must have a smartphone or tablet with a camera. We recommend that you download a QR code reader app that is made specifically for your phone or tablet brand.

Throughout the text, we will share selected samples, templates, and other resources to assist schools and districts in establishing their Collaborative Response structures and processes, and we reference these resources and samples, which are organized and available in the Companion Website. A full listing of all resources available is also given following the Companion Website contents at the front of the text.

To access the Companion Website, please scan the QR code or visit <https://www.jigsawlearning.ca/collaborative-response>. The Companion Website also includes a book study guide to assist teams engaging in the text and looking to further explore the ideas and processes that we describe throughout the book.

However, the text and the companion website would be massive if we included every resource we've collected or developed over the years; also, they do not reflect the new learning we are continually engaging in related to Collaborative Response. We encourage you to visit our website at <http://jigsawlearning.ca> to not only access versions of the templates, additional resources, and the current growing library of samples from a myriad of schools and districts, but also to connect with a flourishing community of educators engaging in Collaborative Response work in their organizations.

Every Child Deserves a Team

As you set forth to envision a Collaborative Response for your school or district, we leave you with a driving message we share as central to this work—a message that speaks to equity, inclusion, and the need for collaborative structures surrounding our learners:

Every child deserves a team!

In the end, every child deserves a team of caring adults who are hypervigilant in recognizing and providing for their needs. We support every child through thoughtfully designed structures and processes and do whatever it takes to create a supportive environment for all!