

# FirstSchool

## Introduction to Building a Culture of Collaborative Inquiry: Using Our Rubrics

Many assume that teaching is a simple job. We choose a skill to impart to a student, figure out what she already knows how to do, and then fill in the gaps with excellent pedagogy. What could be easier? Unfortunately, when we add in 25 other children, reams of paperwork and meetings, and countless other skills that must be taught in the course of a year, we find that the practice of being a teacher is not so simple. Excelling in this profession requires ongoing effort. It is the nature of the job that we rarely exit college well equipped to be superb teachers. Therefore, becoming an excellent teacher is a process that continues throughout our careers. At FirstSchool, we believe that a culture of collaborative inquiry lies at the heart of this process.

In a culture of collaborative inquiry, teachers engage in an iterative process to improve their teaching practices. By acknowledging that they are not perfect, these teachers find parts of their practice that could be improved. They then try new things and collect information to decide whether or not their improvements worked. When things get better, the new practices are retained. When new initiatives fail, they are discarded. Over time, the accumulation of new, better practices leads to significant overall improvements in the quality of education students receive.

This collaborative inquiry process is rarely undertaken in schools for one reason or another. Our goal in this module is to provide you with a systematic way to engage in the collaborative inquiry process, despite hurdles that may have prevented you from doing so before. Along the way, we will provide rubrics and other tools that will serve to keep you focused on the process as well as to think critically about new ways to improve your practice. We caution you to recognize, though, that this is not a competition or an evaluation. Your self-worth should not be determined by the scores you receive on these rubrics, but rather by the effort you put into recognizing your shortcomings and finding ways to improve those areas of your practice. This process will only be as powerful as you allow it to be, given the effort you put in. We strongly believe that honesty with one's self and a commitment to use this module to improve your practice will not only result in improved outcomes for students but in a more satisfying professional practice for yourself, as well. Best of luck!

*-Your friends at FirstSchool*

## ***Getting Started***

- It is important for all relevant parties to be at the table when the rubric is used. In many schools, this will include teachers, support staff, parents, and administrators who are interested in becoming part of a “data team” that focuses on building collaborative inquiry within the school.
- Many of the components concern the way multiple parties use data. For example, in discussing the Culture of Collaborative Inquiry Rubric, each team member must consider both how principals use data as well as how teachers in the school respond to data. Multiple team members from across a variety of roles within your workplace must provide input in order for the team to properly score the rubric.
- When using the rubrics, start with the Beginning (1) column on each rubric and indicator, consider the descriptors, and then move to the right if they do not fit. When team members find the level that best describes their school, they should choose that level as indicative of their school’s present level of functioning. Although many schools have elements found in the Exemplary (4) descriptors, this level should be assigned only if it is the best description of the school when others have already been considered.
- These rubrics are not an end point. Rather, they provide diagnostic information that can be used to form an action plan that allows team members to concretely map out how to move the school toward Exemplary status over the course of the next school year. In some cases, schools may wish to immediately adopt attitudes and practices from the Exemplary column, while in other cases progress may need to be made more slowly, allowing staff time to adjust to these new attitudes and practices.

## ***Revisiting Rubrics***

- Just as the rubrics do not form an end point, they are also not merely a starting point. These rubrics should be revisited frequently to ensure that the school is moving forward on all fronts to identify shortcomings as they arise and remedy them with actions that improve the school’s use of data.
- Schools should document the steps they take in addressing the rubrics. This provides a clear picture of what has been tried in the past and the level of success these efforts have had, and suggests new steps to be taken in the future. Such documentation also allows new team members to be brought up to speed quickly.
- It will often be useful to gather information from staff members who are not on the data team. The varied perspectives of non-team members may serve to cast light on issues that were not within the purview of data team members or may provide a different viewpoint on existing issues that could enrich the discussions generated by the rubrics.

Suggested citation:

Crawford, G., & Holland, A. (2013). *Introduction to building a culture of collaborative inquiry: Using our rubrics*. Chapel Hill, NC: FirstSchool.