

Envisioning A Collaborative Response Model:

Beliefs, Structures, and Processes to Transform How
We Respond to the Needs of Students

Kurtis Hewson, Lorna Hewson, and Jim Parsons



To our mentors and our supporters for your guidance and wisdom
To our students for inspiring us and helping us to stay true to the task
To our colleagues for sharing your journey and experiences
To our families and friends for support and encouragement

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Introduction

Not a Silver Bullet

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. And it will certainly not address instructional shortcomings in classrooms across the broad educational landscape. We recognize “the inherent dangers in efforts to simplify complex tasks” (DuFour, 1998, p. 57); and, as a result, this book will not provide the elusive “secret” schools are seeking to respond to the needs of the diverse population of children coming through their doors each and every day.

What this book will do is examine what we call a Collaborative Response Model and bring attention to basic tenets, elements, and ideas we have shared across schools and districts throughout Alberta. Our goal is to help schools make sure that all students are engaged learners and that no child slips through the cracks. Traditional schools, in our experience, fit some children better than others. This fortuitous population of students that fit our commonly understood mold of schooling are the benefactors of teaching

according to the “myth of average.” These children have found success in the past and will continue to succeed in traditional classroom models.

As teachers, we love these children. However, we believe 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 teacher response to children’s needs either impossible or an exhausting personal martyrdom.

We believe schools can and should change so that, as the old saying goes, the entire community raises the child. Or, in the case of schooling, we believe the entire school teaches the student. Here, we propose a model we believe can move us toward that goal.

Implementing the model 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 place some long-held teaching practices and educational beliefs in direct conflict. We will also raise some conversations typically left dormant to the front and center.

In his delightful 2006 book *The Elephant in the Room: Silence and Denial in Everyday Life*, sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel discusses situations where people refuse to acknowledge obvious truths or deny apparent realities. We believe schools have “elephants in their rooms” that must be confronted. We also believe there are some long-standing instructional and school-wide practices that simply inhibit us from effectively meeting student needs. Some schools would rather “play nice” by continuing to allow ineffective practice that does little to promote children’s learning. We will abandon the practice of pleasant collegiality in schools so we might truly engage in collaborative, challenging conversations that place the needs of children at the center.

The school-wide model presented in this book will not substitute for quality classroom instruction. Our experiences have shown that transitioning to a school-based Collaborative Response Model 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. However, no powerful idea will succeed if classroom instruction is poor. As Sharratt and Fullan (2012) remind us, “poor instruction predicts poor student achievement (although, even in the face of poor instruction, some students excel), and strong instruction promotes high student achievement” (p. 95).

DuFour, DuFour and Eaker (2010) carry that assertion one step further. They believe, “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). Fortunately, our experience working with schools and districts across Alberta has shown us repeatedly that the conversations and laser-like focus placed on students in a Collaborative Response Model 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, although this book will not specifically ensure high-quality classroom instruction in every classroom, it will provide a systemic framework that examines exceptional classroom learning and provides examples of schools that have successfully articulated effective classroom instruction using this model.

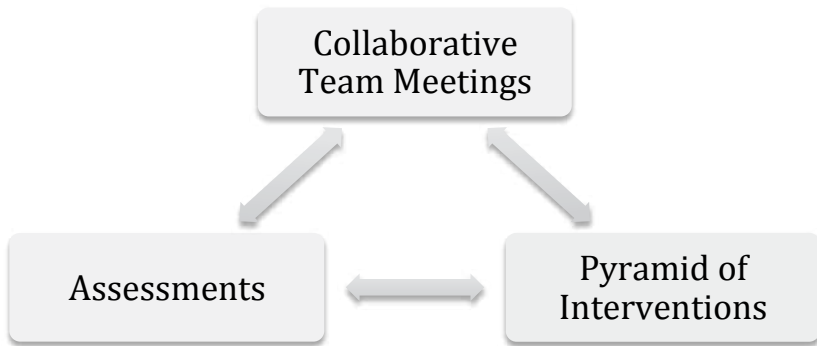
Finally, although this text relies upon and expands tenets of a response to intervention (RTI) model, a Collaborative Response Model is not synonymous with Response to Intervention. The two models are not interchangeable. Shortly, we will examine the distinctive features we believe set a Collaborative Response Model apart from the contemporary RTI literature. Although related, it is important to establish at the outset that this is not another book about Response to Intervention.

What this book *will* do!

So, why begin with a disclaimer? We believe it is important that readers engage our text without any misconceptions about the book’s purpose or content. We recognize that school improvement and reform is 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 upon which schools can build their ongoing efforts, striving for and ensuring success for every child.

This book will share and dissect a school-wide model for addressing the individual needs of students founded upon equal portions of educational research and practical application. Our model has evolved for us in our own school experiences and in our experiences working with other schools and districts throughout Alberta and abroad. This work has involved not only individual school conversations, but district-wide frameworks to support effective school structures and processes. Throughout the text, we share examples from schools and districts throughout Alberta who are framing their work in accordance with the foundational graphic explained in Chapter 2, shared in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1 Visual Representation of the Collaborative Response Model



This book will break down the three foundational components of this responsive framework, providing 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 our model as a framework for discussion and subsequent reform, without strict adherence to specific features of each foundational component. We call this process "hard shell outsides, with soft gooey insides." In other words, we believe our model provides a framework that helps each school create its own specific path toward collaborative response. This said, we strongly believe all three components need to be found if schools are to provide the best possible framework for student success. What each component looks like will be (and should be) unique to the context of each educational environment.

We also recognize (and have witnessed) the reality that establishing a responsive model into many 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 impact 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 Alberta 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 learning and success for all students. This book shares the traditional underpinnings typically observed in schools and the

characteristics of a responsive school culture, with suggestions for making the often difficult but vital transition. Simply stated, we believe traditionally structured schools can no longer meet the needs of all students. As Buffum, Mattos and Weber (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 in a system that may do little to support their efforts. Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) 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.

This book also builds upon 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 a Collaborative Response Model.

Our work is grounded in educational research, and the theories that inform the development of our model clearly meld school practice and educational research. Essentially, we aim to think like teachers and act like researchers. Our ideas are grounded in practical school application, while providing links to contemporary educational research. Our goal is to empower school leaders to “model an understanding of both the theory and practical application of collaborative inquiry and action” (Massey, 2009, p. 18).

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 larger schools with multiple classes at each grade level. Junior high and senior high have successfully used our model to create flexible programs

and enhance student engagement. We are now seeing the impact of district initiatives and directions that subscribe to our framework of response, ensuring 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 who want to make a difference for children. We are writing to help systems that want to support (and maximize) the tremendous work, knowledge, and expertise possessed by teachers, support staff, and the greater school community. We believe schools should value and honor collaboration and that “together we are better.” We also believe districts should build frameworks upon which meaningful conversations can be hung and should work in practical ways to link research with the everyday policies and practices that help children learn. Finally, 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 impact student achievement and that the most effective schools can transcend the effect of student backgrounds (Marzano, 2003). Ultimately, we hope 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.

Examining Our Core Beliefs

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

Core Belief #1: All students can learn

It goes without saying we will be labeled idealists because we believe all children can learn. Yet, we strongly feel 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 Two, the phrase may be present but it is not truly engrained in schools. Also sadly, many schools’ practices and processes are actually counterproductive to

this core belief – even as they post the words “all children can learn” on their walls. However, as you will see throughout this book, we are unwavering in our goal that all students can learn and succeed. But 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 Model.

Core Belief #2: Teachers make the greatest impact on student learning

This belief acknowledges that teachers ultimately know what is best for their students’ learning. Central to a Collaborative Response Model 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 the school educates the child, we also believe all other staff members working with students in schools (a primary tenant discussed in Chapters One and Three) must also weigh in on students’ needs. We believe schools should seek and consider all serious insights.

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 upon in thoughtful and timely ways. As we discuss in Chapter Four, schools simply cannot work unless we believe that teachers know their students best and that they ultimately make the greatest impact on student learning.

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. We believe working together should be more than an aspiration, but an organizational requirement. In Chapter Two, we examine rich, impactful collaboration in depth, discussing the educational paradigm shift that must happen if we truly desire 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.

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 Models. In fact, we would argue that a Collaborative Response Model has limited impact for staff and students without a strong focus on the role and involvement of leadership. We believe 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, the Collaborative Response Model becomes just another burden on the already exhaustive role of the teacher and other professionals working in our organizations.

Chapter Overview

Envisioning a Collaborative Response Model: Beliefs, Structures, and Processes to Transform How We Respond to the Needs of Students 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. Although chapters are presented in a linear fashion, we recognize that the process of re-culturing inherent in the model is not congruent with a “first step one, then step two” mentality. As school culture transforms and different aspects of the framework take shape, each school might look different at each phase of its evolution. Some aspects of the model will take seed at different times.

There is good news. Likely, elements of our model 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 – Re-culturing is about seeing where you are and determining where you want to go. Chapter 1 opens with a narrative of two schools, appropriately named to reflect each school's prevailing culture. Like an abandoned shipwrecked survivor left to its own personal devices, Castaway Elementary typifies the isolated teaching culture predominant in many traditional schools. These schools are characterized by “isolated islands of excellence” where teachers do outstanding work daily with students but are cut-off from other professionals. Teachers in such schools have little support from the development of school-wide structures. These are not bad schools, populated with ineffective teachers; rather, these schools are ill-equipped to collaboratively take advantage of the wealth of professional capital within them.

Mirror this school with Robinson Elementary, aptly named after the Swiss Family Robinson. Unlike a lone castaway, this family of shipwreck survivors worked collaboratively to accomplish more than any individual member could accomplish alone. Robinson Elementary serves as an appropriate moniker for the school described in the narrative. The chapter breaks down

seven essential cultural shifts foundational to the success of a Collaborative Response Model and rallies school leaders to address traditional cultural beliefs that are entrenched and run in opposition to ensuring the success of a Collaborative Response Model.

Chapter 2 – An Overview of the Collaborative Response Model provides an introduction to the student response framework explored in the remaining chapters. This chapter briefly reviews the foundational components that comprise the Collaborative Response Model (CRM). The chapter shows how the Collaborative Response Model simultaneously complements but differs from contemporary Response to Intervention frameworks and shows what can result when any one of these foundational components is not present in schools. Chapter Two examines the role of a CRM in an inclusive framework, focusing on how schools can ensure structures and supports are in place to respond to unique student needs in ways that value an individual school's context.

Chapter 3 – Collaborative Team Meetings shares the first foundational component of a Collaborative Response Model. Like the other two foundational components, eight essential elements of collaborative team meetings will be presented and elaborated:

1. Focus on a common goal
2. Action oriented
3. Maximum staff involvement
4. Time embedded in the school timetable and calendar
5. Formalized process
6. Visual display of students
7. Team meeting notes and tasks
8. Team meeting norms

Central to a school's CRM, collaborative team meetings capitalize on the collective knowledge and expertise of adults in schools, with a laser-like focus on student needs and resulting actions. In essence, Chapter Three embodies what Mike Schmoker writes in the foreword to Richard DuFour and his associates' text *Whatever It Takes* (2004): "What schools most need now (is) to begin harnessing the power of collective intelligence that already resides in the school to solve problems" (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, p. xiii). If a Collaborative Response Model is the vehicle that drives the school forward, the collaborative team meeting is its engine.

Chapter 4 – Assessments describes the critical role that benchmark, diagnostic, and progress monitoring assessments play, serving as the second foundational component of a Collaborative Response Model. Common school-wide assessments provide a shared language essential for successful collaborative conversations and collective problem solving.

As discussed in Chapter 4, 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 upon in the collaborative team meetings. Rather than focusing on implementing specific assessment tools, using these assessments results wisely becomes the emphasis in a Collaborative Response Model. Eight essential elements of the assessments component are identified and discussed:

1. Flag students for discussion
2. Benchmark assessments
3. Progress monitoring assessments
4. Common across the school
5. Efficient use of time
6. Teacher assessments
7. Assessment schedule established
8. Results disaggregated for use

Chapter 5 – Pyramid of Interventions focuses on answering the third critical question of a Professional Learning Community – “How will we respond to students who aren’t learning?” (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002, p. 12). This chapter articulates the importance of establishing a multi-tiered intervention model and stresses the need for school-wide articulation and identification of interventions, strategies, and accommodations to be accessed when responding to the individual needs of students. Chapter 5 establishes a tiered continuum of supports shaped by each school’s unique context and organized to support students at increasing levels of intensity and intervention. Like the other two foundational components, eight essential elements will be shared to guide schools and school leaders in developing their own pyramid of interventions:

1. Increasing Intensity and Support
2. Fit the Context of the School and Student
3. Articulation of Interventions
4. Articulation of Pyramid Tiers
5. Provided by Trained Staff
6. Monitored and Effectiveness Evaluated
7. Parental Consent
8. Communicated to School Community

Chapter 6 – Putting It All Together simultaneously concludes the book and signals new beginnings as schools work to realize a Collaborative Response Model for meeting students’ needs. Three final thoughts for school communities are explored, with a closing message of hope for all members of the school community dedicated to ensuring success for all students.

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 a Collaborative Response Model.



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 Model.



Treasured Templates – A number of snapshots of templates and resources are shared throughout the text. PDF versions of these helpful resources can be accessed through our website at <http://jigsawlearning.ca> or can also be found in editable format in our Collaborative Response Model (CRM) Network.



In the Field – Throughout the text, thoughts and ideas from schools and districts who are working to establish and refine their own Collaborative Response Models 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 the CRM can look like in a variety of unique contexts and organizations.

Collaborative Response Model Network

A Google + community (CRM Network) has been established to support the ongoing work of schools and districts in relation to the Collaborative Response Model. This private, online community is a space where educators can share resources, access samples and editable versions of all templates and documents shared in this text, ask questions, and engage in ongoing professional learning with other teachers and leaders dedicated to supporting the needs of all students. Information about the CRM Network can be found on the website at <http://jigsawlearning.ca> (follow the CRM Network tab).

Our Kids are Worth It

As you set forth to envision a Collaborative Response Model for your school, we leave you with a quote from Spence Rogers that has adorned our offices and served as a mantra for why we do what we do:

Our kids are worth whatever it takes.

In the end, our children deserve to have schools structured to respond effectively to their unique needs, and we must do whatever it takes to make that mission become reality. We start our journey by focusing upon reculturing schools.