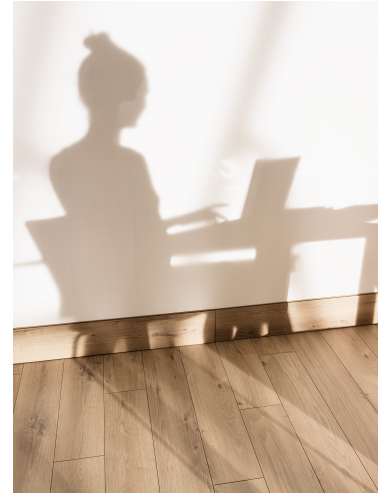




A Team of One: Rethinking Singletons in Collaborative Learning Teams

“I’m the only one who teaches this.”

It’s one of the most common, and most limiting, statements we hear when it comes to PLCs, or what we call Collaborative Learning Teams (CLTs). Whether it’s a lone 5th grade teacher, a single PE teacher, a music teacher, the only Chemistry teacher, a specialist, or someone teaching across multiple grade levels, the conclusion is often the same: there’s no one to collaborate with. And just like that, the work stops, not because it can’t happen, but because we’ve defined collaboration too narrowly.



Too often, collaboration is framed as something that only works when conditions are perfectly aligned such as the same grade level, same content, same department, same pacing, same assessments. When those conditions don’t exist, we assume meaningful collaboration isn’t possible. But **CLTs were never designed to be about shared roles; they were designed to be about shared responsibility for student learning.** When we reduce collaboration to “people who only teach the same thing,” we unintentionally limit the impact of the work and, more importantly, the outcomes for students

To be clear, the barriers people name are real. You may truly be a team of one or a silo for your content area. Schedules may not align. Content areas may differ, and the data you collect may not look the same as someone else’s. Specialist roles can feel disconnected from core instruction.

These are structural realities, but they are not instructional dead ends. The moment we treat them as such, we shift from problem-solving to excuse-making, and that’s where progress stalls.

At their core, Collaborative Learning Teams are not about logistics, they are about learning. They exist to answer four essential questions: **What do we want students to know and be able to do? How will students demonstrate their level of understanding? What Tier 1 strategies will we use to ensure students reach proficiency? What strategies will we use to reteach and extend learning based on the data?** None of these questions require identical teaching assignments. What they require is clarity, evidence, and a shared commitment to improving outcomes for all students. That’s why we at Creative Leadership Solutions focus on **SAID: standards, assessment, instruction, and differentiation.**



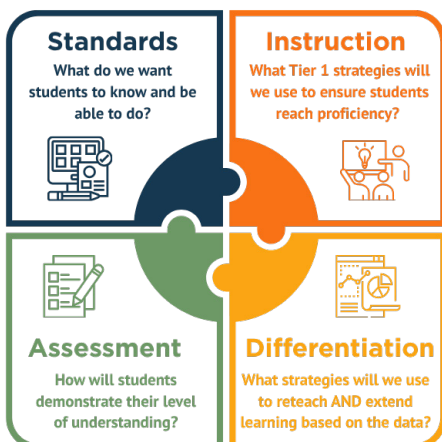
Engage in Vertical Collaboration

For educators who find themselves in a “silo” or working as a “team of one”, the path forward begins by expanding what collaboration looks like. One powerful shift is to move from horizontal collaboration to vertical collaboration. Instead of focusing only on those who teach the same grade or subject, educators can look across grade levels to examine how skills develop over time. Writing, for example, becomes a natural and powerful entry point for this work. It exists in every classroom, through science explanations, math reasoning, reflections in PE, or analysis in music, and it provides clear, comparable evidence of student thinking. When teams analyze student writing using a common rubric, they can calibrate expectations, identify gaps, and plan targeted instruction. Writing is not just another subject; it is a window into how students think.

Align Standards

In the same way, collaboration can be anchored in shared standards rather than shared roles. Educators do not need to teach the same lesson to focus on the same skill. Teams can align around argumentative writing, the use of evidence, vocabulary development, or increasing the level of cognitive demand through increased Depth of Knowledge. The focus shifts from what is being taught to what students need to learn. Even when content or departments differ, teams can use common protocols such as analyzing student work, identifying trends, planning responses, and monitoring impact. Consistency in process creates clarity, even when the contexts vary.

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Shift Mindsets

Perhaps the most significant barrier to effective CLTs, however, is not structural, it is mindset. Statements like “this won’t work here,” or “that’s only for grade-level teams,” shut down innovation before it even begins. The moment we generalize, we stop leading. Instead, we should be asking: How might we make this work? Who could help us think differently? What is one place we could start? Progress does not come from perfect conditions; it comes from purposeful action.



CLS Insights

Tap Into Collective Expertise

Another critical shift is recognizing that a “team of one” is rarely truly alone. Many systems are rich with expertise that is simply underutilized. Instructional coaches, English language development specialists, special education teachers, counselors, reading specialists, and administrators all play a role in strengthening instruction. The most effective CLTs tap into this collective expertise rather than operating in isolation. At the same time, while scheduling is often cited as a barrier, it is also one of the most solvable challenges. Whether through adjusted meeting structures, shorter and more focused collaboration cycles, or shared tools that allow for ongoing reflection, the issue is less about time existing and more about how intentionally it is used.

For leaders, this requires both clarity and courage. We cannot accept “we can’t” as the final answer. We must establish clear expectations for collaboration, provide flexible structures to support it, and hold teams accountable to evidence of student learning. Because ultimately, CLTs are not about meetings, they are about results.

You may be a team of one, but **your students deserve a system of many.** Collaboration is not about proximity; it is about purpose. And when we expand our definition of what collaboration can look like, we unlock the true power of Collaborative Learning Teams.



Written by Dr. Rachael George
Associate
Creative Leadership Solutions
[Contact Rachael](#)



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