Developing a Humane Education Focused Learning Team
Using Humane Education to Improve Student Performance and the School Community

What is a Learning Team?

Learning teams, as defined by Nancy Fitchman Dana, College of Education at the University of Florida, are a form of professional development which brings teachers together to learn from practice. They meet on a regular basis and the time together is often structured by the use of protocols to ensure focused, deliberate conversation and dialogue by teachers about student work and student learning.

See Nancy's PowerPoint presentation from her www.EdWeek.org webinar at http://www.edweek.org/media/finalslides_forposting.pdf.

Why Use a Learning Team Versus Traditional Professional Development?

A learning team will help your group determine areas in which additional teacher and student learning would be helpful or what is needed in a student population. Participants are asked to track student behavior and outcomes, read articles, attend workshops or courses, or invite consultants to assist them in acquiring necessary knowledge or skills. In addition to regular learning team meetings, participants observe and conduct other job-related responsibilities including presentation of the group findings. Ideally the learning team work will benefit the school community.

In this instance, the work of your learning team will determine the validity of humane-based work in the realms of academics, values or character education, and/or the school community. Based on the question or questions designed by your learning team you will be asked to collect data, read or summarize articles, and assist each other in the action research model.

Create Protocols and Goals

Meeting #1:

Step1: Adopt Protocols
In order to begin your learning team it is suggested that the team develop or adopt protocols. These are a script or series of timed steps for how a conversation among teachers on the chosen topic will develop. The protocol is usually created at the first meeting.

According to the *Goal Setting Protocol* developed by Jay Davis (document is located at www.nsrfharmony.org) the first meeting will also answer the three following questions:

-What does the group hope to accomplish?
-What are the individual goals of each group member?
-How will each group member provide input and take responsibility for learning team growth?

This is the point where your group needs to look at a broad basic need in your classes, student achievement, or school community. How can this learning group use humane education and humane concepts to meet this need? A timed brainstorming session can be helpful in hearing all ideas in the group. Upon completion of this brainstorming session list all ideas on the board or poster paper for group discussion. Using these ideas create a group goal or "problem" that you will work to solve.

Example: (Learning Team of 7th Grade Reading Teachers)
Students in the lowest-level 7th grade reading classes have no interest in reading, have a low comprehension rate, and dislike reading aloud due to inconsistencies in pronunciation and decoding.

Step 2: Brainstorm Goals and Materials
The second step in choosing a group goal requires that each group participant brainstorm personal goals (including student/teacher goals and professional development materials.) Each participant may go about answering the question in a slightly different way depending on his or her student population and background. This is fine because the group will share a summary of professional development materials read as well as project results and data in reporting.

Example:

Goals of Participant #1:	Professional Development/Resource Materials:
-Increase time spent reading.	-*Differentiated Instruction for Today's Classroom*
-Increase student decoding skills.	- *You and Your Action Research Project*
-Students will use and understand context clues.	-*Canines In the Classroom*

Goals of participant #2:	Professional Development/Resource Materials:
-Increase comprehension of material read.	-*KIND News* classroom newspaper; Senior Edition
-Increase humane-based/character knowledge of students	-*Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom*
-Increase class-wide test scores	

After discussion or introduction of these materials, group participants may wish to adopt resources suggested by others or continue using their own items. (It is recommended that at least one resource item be used by all group members.) Remember these items of professional development or resource materials will be summarized to the group by the teacher who has been using it throughout the year.

Numerous protocol samples are available from the National School Reform Faculty. These can be seen at http://www.nsrfharmony.org.

Step 3: Creating Your Overarching Question (How to Solve the Problem)

When creating your Learning Team project you will need an overarching question, or question that will help you to solve the group problem. This should be a general question and one that can have more than one answer depending on the needs of individual group members. Ask the group members to individually craft a broad example question. (You may wish to time the activity.) Hear each sample question and create your group overarching question.

Example:
What actions can we take as reading teachers to improve reading achievement and comprehension of our lowest quartile students?

Step 4: Chose Rules and Tasks

Step four of the first meeting requires each participant to take-on a role or become responsible for part of future meetings. The group may wish to use the Learning Team Planning Agenda for this and future meetings. A facilitator and place for the next meeting needs to be chosen before the closing of the current meeting. The individual chosen as facilitator may find the Pre-Conference Guide, Pre-Conference Protocol, and Considerations for Responsive Facilitation useful.

Example:
Participant #1:
Will read *Canines in the Classroom* and present a summary of findings to the group at the next meeting.
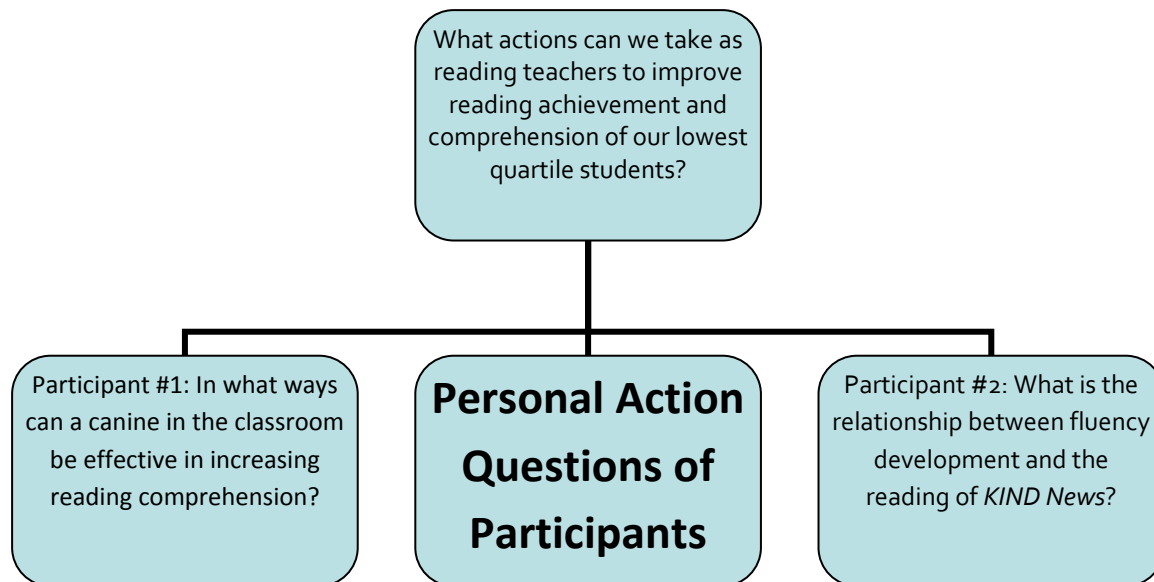
Participant #2:
Will obtain sample copies of *KIND News* for each group member and provide ideas for how this resource could be used to increase reading comprehension and decoding.

All Participants:
Will create a personal "action question" based upon the problem and overarching question. Example:

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┌─────────────────────────┐
│  What actions can we take as │
│  reading teachers to improve │
│  reading achievement and     │
│  comprehension of our lowest │
│  quartile students?          │
└─────────────────────────┘
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| Participant #1: In what ways can a canine in the classroom be effective in increasing reading comprehension? | **Personal Action Questions of Participants** | Participant #2: What is the relationship between fluency development and the reading of *KIND News*? |

Now What?

Meeting #2:

Each group member should arrive at the meeting with a personal action question and his or her summary information for the group. The personal action questions should be shared and written on the board or poster under the overarching question. A chart similar to the one above is often most useful in keeping track of group progress.

Participants will spend 5 minutes each outlining or summarizing their pre-assigned work answering the questions:
-What did I do?
-Why is this important to me? To our group?

Example:
Participant #1:
I read *Canines in the Classroom* and researched how animal-assisted reading or reading to dogs improves student morale and encourages reading.

This is important to me because in order to improve reading comprehension the students must enjoy reading and not be deterred by the process. Research data also shows that read alouds increase the ability to decode and increases comfort. Students will also learn about canines, the care they require, and proper interaction.

Individuals may wish to use a chart similar to the one below when reporting highlights of pre-assigned work. These blank worksheets can be found in the Learning Team Planning Agenda.

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                              ┌─────────────────────────┐
                              │  What actions can we     │
                              │  take as reading         │
                              │  teachers to improve     │
                              │  reading achievement and │
                              │  comprehension of our    │
                              │  lowest quartile         │
                              │  students?               │
                              └─────────────────────────┘
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| Participant #1: In what ways can a canine in the classroom be effective in increasing reading comprehension? | **Personal Action Questions of Participants** | Participant #2: What is the relationship between fluency development and the reading of *KIND News*? |

Why choose to work with a literacy dog?

| Reading to dogs improves student morale and encourages reading. In order to improve reading comprehension students must enjoy reading and not be deterred by the process. | Data shows that practice reading aloud increases comfort in reading and ability to decode. | Students will learn about canines, the care they require, and proper interaction. |
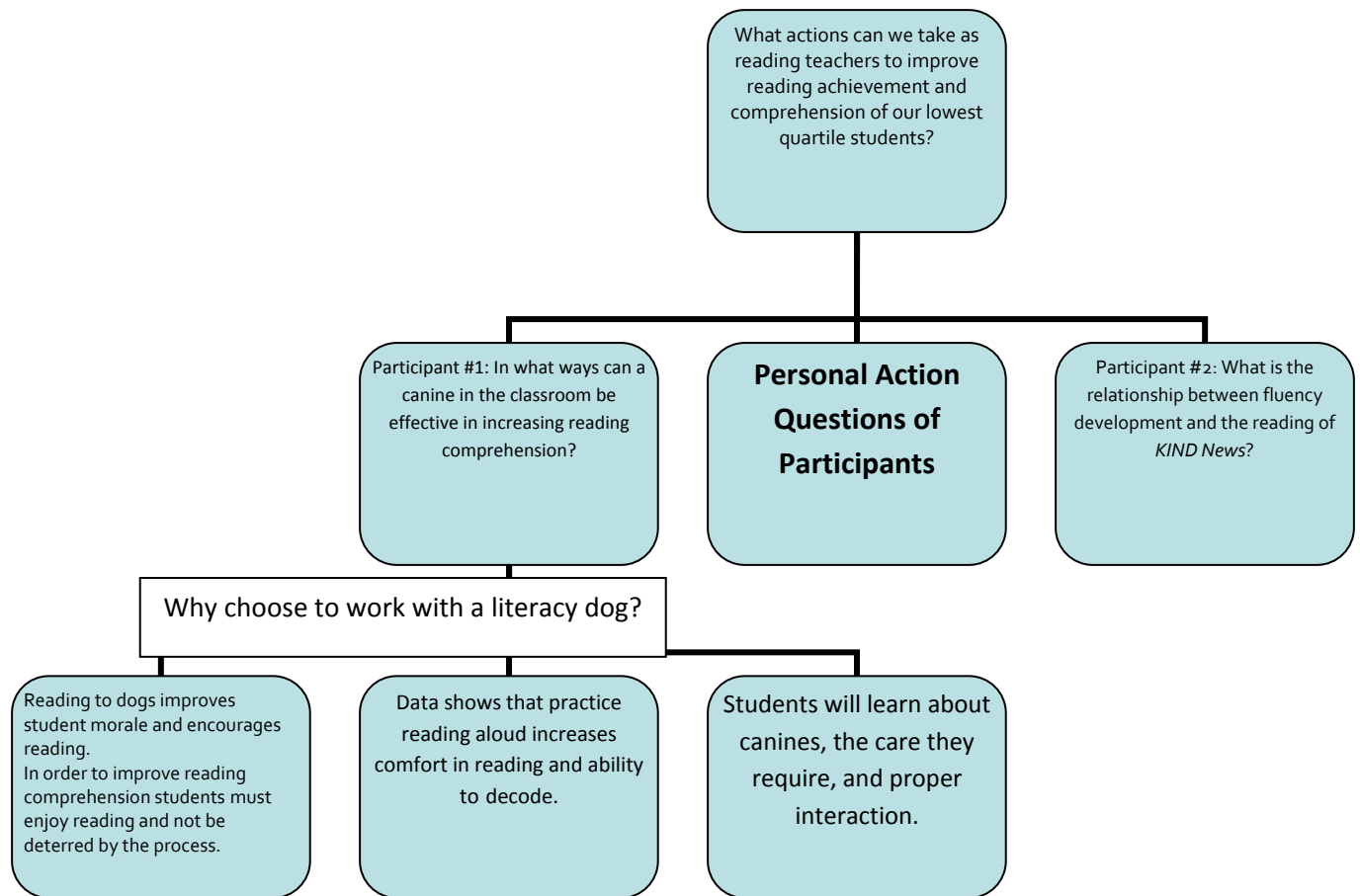
The group should ask clarifying questions and reflect on the topic. (This section should take approximately 10 minutes)
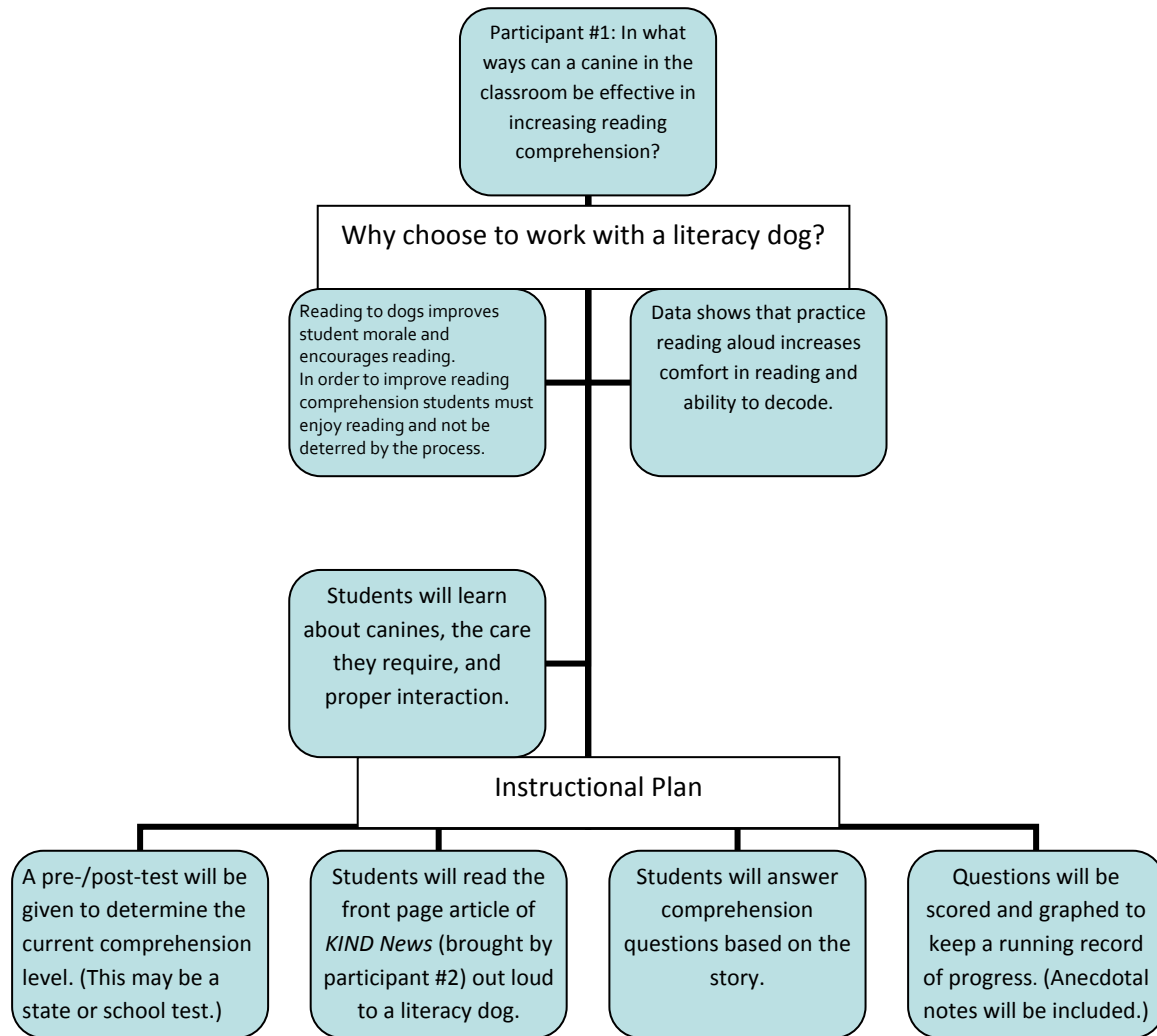
Example reflection questions:
-What we wonder about this...
-The questions this seems to raise...
-How could we learn more about this topic?
-Why this seems important to you is...
-What could this topic bring to colleagues?

This process is repeated for each member of the group.

The facilitator will then ask each group member to create an instructional plan for achieving the goal or answering the overarching question. The instructional plan will include at least three ideas for facilitation of the project.

A facilitator and place for the next meeting needs to be chosen before the closing of the current meeting. Group members will choose tasks.

Example Instructional Plan

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                    ┌─────────────────────────┐
                    │  Participant #1: In what │
                    │  ways can a canine in the│
                    │  classroom be effective in│
                    │  increasing reading      │
                    │  comprehension?          │
                    └─────────────────────────┘
           ┌────────────────────────────────────────────┐
           │  Why choose to work with a literacy dog?    │
           └────────────────────────────────────────────┘
     ┌──────────────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────────┐
     │ Reading to dogs improves │   │ Data shows that practice │
     │ student morale and       │   │ reading aloud increases  │
     │ encourages reading.      │   │ comfort in reading and   │
     │ In order to improve reading│  │ ability to decode.       │
     │ comprehension students must│  └──────────────────────────┘
     │ enjoy reading and not be │
     │ deterred by the process. │
     └──────────────────────────┘
     ┌──────────────────────────┐
     │ Students will learn      │
     │ about canines, the care  │
     │ they require, and        │
     │ proper interaction.      │
     └──────────────────────────┘
           ┌────────────────────────────────────────────┐
           │           Instructional Plan                │
           └────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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| A pre-/post-test will be given to determine the current comprehension level. (This may be a state or school test.) | Students will read the front page article of *KIND News* (brought by participant #2) out loud to a literacy dog. | Students will answer comprehension questions based on the story. | Questions will be scored and graphed to keep a running record of progress. (Anecdotal notes will be included.) |

Anecdotal notes should include items related to both academic and humane/character growth. You may wish to keep a file of student work and/or comments.

Example:
"Joey" stated that reading to Kasey the literacy dog was great because she did not care if he took a long time pronouncing a word. (Date)

Students have only _____ office referrals in the month of _____. This is down from _____ office referrals last month. (Character/humane education can decrease undesired behaviors and referrals.)

Students have learned to understand some body language of dogs through observation. (Collection of journal/class writings showing this outcome.)

Ready to Go!

Meeting #3 and Beyond:

The remaining meetings will follow the same agenda as meeting #2.

Participants will spend 5 minutes each outlining or summarizing their pre-assigned work answering the questions:
-What did I do?
-Why is this important to me? To our group?

The group should ask clarifying questions and reflect on the topic. (This section should take approximately 10 minutes)

Example reflection questions:
-What we wonder about this...
-The questions this seems to raise...
-How could we learn more about this topic?
-Why this seems important to you is...
-What could this topic bring to colleagues?

This process is repeated for each member of the group.

At this time each group member should be prepared to implement his or her action research project within the learning team framework. Each participant will collect individual data research and share it with the team. Analysis should be an on-going part of this team work as revisions may need to be made.

Spread the Word!

Part of a learning team is sharing your findings with the larger school and educational community. The outcomes can be used to improve the school community and presented to the curriculum director, administrators, faculty meeting, or at a school-wide in-service. The results will help the team, and school community, in planning future projects, curriculum, or learning teams.

Additionally, please send a copy of your plan and results to Stephanie Clark at sclark@hsus.org. Your work may inspire other educators to infuse humane education and humane themes in their classroom work.

Possible Topics of Study:

Are you looking for some inspiration? Once you have designed your goal for student achievement, here are a few possible learning team themes. This learning team model can be used with any subject area.

-Animals in Literature
-Animals and Religion: A Study of Their History
-Animals as Inspiration in Art and Creative Mediums
-The Political Movement and Protection of Animals
-Study of Wildlife Habitat (Ecology)
-Farms Throughout Time and Animal Welfare
-Life Skills Mathematics and the True Cost of Pets
-Current Events and Animals in the Media
-Health and Wellness: Nutrition, Exercise, and Socialization
-Building Safe Schools and Communities Through Humane Concepts
-A Community of Character: Animal-Themed Service-Learning Projects

Resources

Haslam, B. (1997, Fall). How to rebuild a local professional development infrastructure. *NAS Getting Better by Design*. Arlington, VA: New American Schools.
Download in PDF form at http://www.naschools.org/respub/haslam.pdf

Bruce Haslam argues that too many schools still see professional development as something that is delivered to teachers without opportunities for follow up, little or no time for individual or collective reflection, and little testing of new ideas and information. He outlines a six-step school transformation strategy for districts: (1) convene a professional development task force, (2) map the local professional development infrastructure, (3) agree on broad principles and attributes to guide local practice, (4) report on current professional development programs and policies, (5) redesign current professional development programs and policies to support school transformation, (6) and monitor progress continuously.

Hord, S. (1992). *Facilitative leadership: The imperative for change*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
Read at http://www.sedl.org/change/facilitate/

The text contains research that supports six categories of actions that are used by effective leaders to facilitate change. These include developing a culture of readiness for change, promoting the vision, providing the necessary resources, ensuring the availability of professional development, maintaining checks on progress, and providing the ongoing assistance necessary for change to occur smoothly.

Hord, S. (1994). Staff development and change process: Cut from the same cloth. *Issues...about Change, 4*(2). Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
Read at http://www.sedl.org/change/issues/issues42.html

In this paper, Shirley Hord describes the Joyce and Showers staff development model and relates it to a change model derived from school improvement studies. Noting the fit of the two models, Hord suggests successful strategies for a comprehensive approach to changing teachers' practices which include developing and articulating a vision, planning and providing resources, investing in training, monitoring progress, providing continuous assistance, and creating a context conducive to change.