Glimpse into any classroom in the country, and it wouldn’t be surprising to see students interacting and working together, engaged in group projects or other forms of collaboration. But in the Fulton County Schools system in Atlanta, Georgia, it’s equally common to walk through a school building and see teachers engaged in similar types of collaborative learning and problem solving.

That’s because teachers in Fulton County Schools have opportunities for collaborative and personalized professional learning opportunities. These educators collaborate on lesson plans, visit each other’s classrooms, and study student work together. Student data drives teachers’ learning and helps pinpoint what they need to do differently to ensure they meet the needs of their students. In short, these teachers have more time within their schools to focus on improving teaching. And all of this creates a learning-focused culture within their schools that helps sustain the teachers’ professional growth and development.

**So what are the key elements of this type of strong, collaborative professional learning?**

First, teachers want—and benefit the most from—job-embedded professional learning that happens within their school day. At the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, we believe that schools are where the action of learning happens—for both students and teachers. It’s crucial to recognize that teachers need the time and space in their schools to plan, collaborate, learn, and reflect. For example, in its recent Reimagining the School Day report, the Center for American Progress (CAP) looked at five promising innovative school schedules—all of which included additional time for teachers to plan and collaborate.

The thinking is that “providing teachers with more time to plan and attend to other responsibilities throughout the school day creates systematic opportunities to support new teachers and stretch more seasoned teachers—increasing the likelihood of teacher retention,” according to the CAP report.

Second, teachers reap tremendous benefits from working with teams of colleagues—especially those who teach the same grade or subject—to plan and share best practices. And it is particularly important for teachers to have time to collaborate on reviewing data to understand what’s working and where to focus for improvement. These data could come from formative assessments or they could be artifacts of student work, but they should be available to teachers in real time so that they can continuously refine their practice to support students.

Third, professional learning should be anchored in a strong instructional system that includes coherent and relevant materials, tools, and curricula that are aligned to high standards. In the District of Columbia Public Schools system, teachers engage in content-specific professional learning that is tied to the district’s curricula. Notably, the learning happens within the teachers’ schools, in small groups that take a dynamic inquiry-based approach and build on their learning from one week to the next. This cycle of inquiry and collaboration enables the teachers to better use and adapt the curricula to meet their students’ needs.

Teachers have a wealth of expertise, but too few opportunities to share that expertise. School-level improvements begin with the actions and behaviors of the adults in the building. Supporting students most in need requires a close examination of data, curriculum, and instructional practices. This provides every reason to expand professional learning opportunities that fuel collaboration and continuous improvement.