

Research shows that teachers benefit from proximity

March 27 2017, by Julie Deardorff

Teachers have long been portrayed as independent contractors, working alone and behind closed doors.

But new Northwestern University School of Education and Social Policy research suggests teachers may benefit from the chance encounters that stem from working near one another inside the school [building](#).

In a study published in the current issue of the journal *Sociology of Education*, professor James Spillane of Northwestern, along with Matthew Shirrell of George Washington University and Tracy Sweet of the University of Maryland, explored how physical proximity influenced the way teachers interacted and talked shop.

They found that the physical distance between teachers— whether measured using the distance between classrooms or by the overlap of the areas teachers frequent in school buildings – affected the likelihood that school [staff](#) interacted with one another. Moreover, physical proximity had a stronger impact on teachers of the same grade level than teachers of different grades.

Based on [teacher](#) interviews, the researchers found that proximity decreases the time and effort teachers need to interact with their colleagues. It also increased unplanned conversations, allowing educators to share ideas or discuss problems soon after they occur.

"The 'spatial configurations of social life' are consequential, even within

modest-sized elementary schools, but they are too often ignored," said Spillane, one the world's top education leadership researchers and the Spencer T. and Ann W. Olin Professor in Learning and Organizational Change.

Heard Around the Watercooler

While regular formal meetings are important, teachers can benefit from more immediate discussions with peers, especially after a novel or challenging classroom situation.

"It happens on such an informal and formal basis," said Mary, a fifth-grade teacher, who was quoted in the study. "We can walk down the hallway and get in a conversation about math. And it could be from something a student said or did, or a way of solving a problem."

The research has several implications for education practice:

- School buildings should be designed to promote interaction by minimizing the distances between classrooms and requiring teachers to travel common paths in school buildings.
- "Master" teachers or those in leadership positions should work in spaces close to other teachers and staff to improve the likelihood of interactions with these instructional leaders.
- School leaders should consider proximity when distributing staff throughout [school](#) buildings to maximize the chances staff have to interact with exemplary teachers, teachers of other grade levels, or staff with particular areas of expertise.

More information: James P. Spillane et al. The Elephant in the Schoolhouse, *Sociology of Education* (2017). [DOI:](#)

[10.1177/0038040717696151](https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040717696151)

Provided by Northwestern University

Citation: Research shows that teachers benefit from proximity (2017, March 27) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-03-teachers-benefit-proximity.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.