

# **Teachers Helping Teachers**

**A Thirty-minute Problem Solving  
Model**



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*Teachers Helping Teachers: Problem solving teams that work*

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## TEACHERS HELPING TEACHERS

### A Thirty-minute Problem Solving Model

Welcome to **Teachers Helping Teachers**. This program provides powerful and efficient tools that teachers are using to come to terms with the often difficult professional challenges they face.

As a particular approach to problem solving, **Teachers Helping Teachers** is equipping teachers to address the learning needs and learning styles of individual students, regardless of student ability level. It is an approach that is also helping teachers address a range of problem student behaviours.

Just as important, **Teachers Helping Teachers** is an effective way to link teachers together, build teamwork, engender a sense of teacher confidence and peer support and generate new and effective ideas in education.

Used properly, this approach can extend the creative and technical skills of all partners in quality education – teachers, counsellors, administrators, parents and community professionals. The **Teachers Helping Teachers** approach is also helping to create a new culture in education – one based on collaboration, peer support, mutual respect and a search for excellence.

**Teachers Helping Teachers** is based on "Problem Solving Teams: A Thirty-Minute Peer-Helping Model", which was developed by Porter, Wilson, Kelly

and den Otter (1991). It is an adaptation of "*The Teacher Assistance Team Model*", which was first pioneered by Chalfant and Psych (1979).

This manual takes you step-by-step through this particular approach to resolving many of the challenges that educators and other partners in education face today.

The manual is designed to be used with the accompanying video. Pages 4 to 10 of this manual should be read before viewing the video.

Pages 11 to 22 review and provide further details on the concepts presented in the video.

Pages 23 to 30 provide additional resources to help you and your colleagues move forward using this approach to collaborative and effective problem solving in education.

**TEACHERS HELPING TEACHERS ...**

**WHAT IS THIS APPROACH?**

*Teachers Helping Teachers* is a quick, systematic and effective way of:

- identifying issues in education that must be addressed as they emerge;
- developing action plans to address those issues;
- following through on those action plans in the form of concrete implementation steps; and
- ensuring that all partners in education clearly understand their roles, are accountable to the students and families they serve and feel supported by their peers.

It is an approach to problem solving that educators can use after ordinary problem solving methods, such as informal discussion with colleagues and consulting the reference library, have been tried and found wanting.

**TEACHERS HELPING TEACHERS  
SYSTEMATICALLY FOLLOWS SEVEN STEPS IN  
30 MINUTES:**

- 1) Briefly introducing a frustrating problem that is faced by a referring teacher and providing an overview of the process for addressing that problem.
- 2) Listening to a statement of the problem in the words of the referring teacher.
- 3) Conducting a group discussion with the referring teacher concerning the details of the problem.
- 4) Brainstorming among colleagues in the presence of the referring teacher on potential solutions to the problem.
- 5) Selection by the referring teacher of the most workable strategies presented during the brainstorming for addressing the problem at the present time.
- 6) Development of an action plan that will ensure appropriate responses to the problem.
- 7) Closing the meeting.

**This approach is designed to take no more than 30 minutes of teacher time for any given problem solving meeting.**

***TEACHERS HELPING TEACHERS***

**IS BASED ON THE FOLLOWING PRINCIPLES:**

- Students have a right to a quality education.
- Teachers have a responsibility to provide a quality education.
- Teachers are capable human beings who are able to learn a great deal from one another and from their other partners in education.
- Collaboration, teamwork, self-confidence and innovation, rather than teacher isolation and reliance on experts from outside the school, are required more than ever to address today's challenges in education.
- The educational system is able to serve all students effectively when teachers collaborate intelligently and effectively.
- New ideas and fresh approaches to problems are generated where partners in education have opportunities to think about, and share ideas on, constructive options.
- No matter how difficult the challenges may seem, teachers and their other partners in education can together make a positive difference in the lives of students and their families.

### **WHO IS INVOLVED IN THE PROCESS?**

***Teachers Helping Teachers*** is an approach to problem solving that recognizes the importance of the following partners in education:

- the "referring teacher";
- someone to whom referring teachers can go with their difficulties;
- the problem solving team;
- the team facilitator;
- the recorder.

The next few pages outline the role of each of these key players in collaborating for effective problem solving in education.

### **THE REFERRING TEACHER**

The referring teacher is any teacher (or administrator or parent) who is facing a difficulty with a student or group of students. This individual voluntarily brings their concern to the attention of someone else who is mandated, at the referring person's request, to convene a gathering of a problem solving team.

Naturally, a process such as this is not for each and every difficulty the classroom teacher faces from day to day. The teacher should be encouraged to use this approach after exhausting other options, including informal discussions with other teachers, consulting with parents and seeking advice from resource teachers and other resource persons. However, if the teacher still faces frustrating situations after trying those options, then access to a problem solving team becomes an important option.

### **SOMEONE FOR THE REFERRING TEACHER TO GO TO**

Teachers must have someone to turn to in the event that they face a difficulty. Typically, such an individual could be a Methods and Resource Teacher, a school counsellor, another classroom teacher or even a school administrator who has been designated with this responsibility. This person should be mandated – usually by the school principal – to convene a meeting of a problem solving team at the referring teacher's request.

### **THE PROBLEM SOLVING TEAM**

Who participates in the problem solving team depends largely on the particular issue at hand. If it is a difficulty relating to a student's language development, it may make sense for a speech and language pathologist or another communications specialist to be invited to participate in the team. If the issue relates to student behaviour, perhaps the school social worker should be invited to participate. A classmate of the student who knows him or her well might be asked to participate. The student's parent may have particularly important insights to offer. The student who is the focus of concern might even be invited to participate. After all, they will have a major stake in whatever action plan comes about as a result of the team's discussion.

The make up of the problem solving team is flexible. Who participates should be determined in light of the issue at hand. However, three important criteria have been found helpful in guiding the selection of participants.

- 1) Ideally, the size of the problem solving team should be somewhere between five and seven persons.
- 2) The referring teacher should feel comfortable with each of the team members.
- 3) At least one (and preferably more) of the team members should be a regular classroom teacher.

**Individuals are identified and invited by the team facilitator to participate in the problem solving meeting.**

### **THE TEAM FACILITATOR**

The facilitator should be a "people person". They should be skilled at creating meeting situations that are relaxed, non-judgmental and welcoming for all participants. They should understand how to support the participation and contributions of each member of the team.

At the same time, facilitators should be results-oriented. That is, they should be skilled at the following:

- clarifying and summarizing the essential issues;
- keeping the discussion focused on the matter at hand;
- moving the discussion forward in a systematic yet relaxed and productive manner;
- working with others to develop practical action plans;
- ensuring that all team members understand the specifics of action plans and team members' respective roles;
- wrapping up meetings within the allotted time-frame (30 minutes).

### **THE RECORDER**

The recorder is a member of the problem solving team and participates as a regular team member during the meeting, but has the additional responsibility of *accurately* summarizing on a flip chart (in point form only) the key ideas that emerge during the meeting.

The facilitator asks one of the team members to perform this role. It is critical that the recorder be a good listener and skilled in the art of summarizing. The recorder should be a person who is able to see beyond their own pre-established views. It is critical that what participants

actually say during the meeting is not filtered by the biases of the recorder.

The need for a good recorder during the problem solving meeting is an important factor for the facilitator to consider in identifying individuals to take part in the process.

### ***WHAT OTHER FACTORS ARE INVOLVED?***

The ***Teachers Helping Teachers*** approach recognizes that the following cultural factors and values are important in the educational environment:

- trust among colleagues;
- a willingness by teachers, administrators and other partners in education to recognize and be honest about their personal and professional limitations;
- positive encouragement to share difficulties with colleagues;
- non-critical attitudes among colleagues towards partners in education who are facing particular difficulties;
- the assumption that all partners in education have valuable insights to offer that can enrich one another;
- confidence that, by working constructively together, partners in education can make a positive difference for one another and for the students they serve;
- the assumption that the referring teacher is in the best position to judge which strategies should ultimately be used to address the particular challenge they are facing.

These factors are present in educational environments where the ***Teachers Helping Teachers*** approach works most effectively.

Educational administrators have an important role to play in ensuring the achievement of this kind of cultural environment. Yet, even if these cultural factors are not already present in the educational environment, ***Teachers Helping Teachers*** can be used as an effective means of building towards such a cultural environment.

# **THE SEVEN STAGES OF THE “TEACHERS HELPING TEACHERS”**

## **Problem Solving Meeting**



## **STAGE 1:**

### **INTRODUCING THE PROBLEM AND THE PROCESS**

During the first stage of this process, the facilitator briefly summarizes the problem that is the focus of the meeting.

If team members are not familiar with the problem solving process, the facilitator should also briefly outline the stages of the process. (This is not required if team members are already familiar with the process.)

The facilitator then moves on to do the following in Stage 1:

- Help the referring teacher to concisely explain the problem, specify what they want to happen that is not happening and identify what assistance they want from the group. The more concisely the referring teacher can state the problem and their expectations, the better.
- If useful, explain any background information that is important for team members to understand about the student or the problem, or help the referring teacher to do this.
- Ask one of the team members to act as recorder. This member can still be an active participant in the group.

Other members of the problem solving team should listen attentively and model a non-judgmental attitude towards the referring teacher, the student and how the issues have been framed.

**The facilitator should ensure that the initial stage of the process takes only two or three minutes.**

## **STAGE 2:**

### **STATEMENT FROM THE REFERRING TEACHER**

In this stage, the facilitator should invite the referring teacher to explain in more detail the particulars of the difficult situation.

Other members of the team should again listen attentively and non-judgmentally. They should *not* ask questions of the referring teacher at this point in the process.

The recorder should capture in point form the essential details of the teacher's statement. These points should be printed on a flip chart that is clearly visible to all members of the team.

**The facilitator should ensure that Stage 2 is completed in two or three minutes.**

## **STAGE 3:**

### **GROUP DISCUSSION WITH THE REFERRING TEACHER**

After the referring teacher concludes their oral statement, the facilitator should thank the teacher and then invite other group members to ask questions of the referring teacher. The facilitator should explain that purpose of this stage of the process is to help the team members create their own mental picture of the situation at hand. The questions they ask should aim to clear up any uncertainties they may have about that situation.

It has been found helpful to have each of the team members invited to present their question in turn and wait for the referring teacher's response.

Team members should "pass" if they do not have a question.

The facilitator should ensure that this stage of the process is brief (three to five minutes) and focuses on clarifying essential facts.

Lines of questioning that might be pursued could explore any of the following:

- how the problem is played out in various situations (e.g., the kinds of problem behaviour a student exhibits; who or what this behaviour seems directed at; the particular learning difficulties the student is encountering across subject areas);
- the student's personal background to the extent that it might shed light on the problem at hand;
- factors that might maintain the problem (e.g., rewards or lack of rewards for particular performance and behaviours; teaching and other methods that have been used to address the problem);
- factors that might offset the problem (e.g., the actions of the referring teacher or of other significant people when the problem is *not* occurring);
- significant people in the student's environment and those people's expectations concerning the student's behaviour and performance;
- home routines that might be related to the problem;

- instructional variables or classroom routines that might be related to the problem;
- the strengths and interests of the student (e.g., "What things does Jeff do well?" "In what subject area is William succeeding?" "What things seem to make Mary enthusiastic?");
- resources that might have been used in an effort to address the problem (e.g., a particular learning kit).

The facilitator should be attentive to, and respectfully redirect, lines of questioning that implicitly criticize the referring teacher's response or lack of response to the difficult situation.

**The recorder should capture the essential details of the referring teacher's answers in point form on the flip chart.**

**The Facilitator should limit this stage to 4-5 minutes.**

## **STAGE 4:**

### **BRAINSTORMING**

After a maximum of five minutes of clarification, the facilitator should then move the group on to the fourth stage of the process. The facilitator should explain that the purpose at this point is to brainstorm to come up with brief and practical suggestions that the referring teacher might consider as means of addressing the problem at hand.

The facilitator invites each team member (not the referring teacher) to offer, in turn, whatever suggestions they feel could be helpful in

addressing the difficult situation. Team members who have not formulated an idea or whose idea has already been raised by someone else in the team should simply "pass" when invited to speak.

Team members should direct their suggestions to the facilitator, not to the referring teacher. The referring teacher does not interact with other team members during this stage of the process. Moreover, the team members do not comment on one another's suggestions. This arrangement has been found helpful in creating a climate that puts each team member at ease while making their contribution. It also frees the referring teacher from feeling that he or she must have a ready response for – or defense against – the ideas that are generated.

This process has been found to generate new ideas that team members would not ordinarily have anticipated. To ensure that everyone in the team has ample opportunities to consider the ideas, to think them through and to come up with alternatives or further refinements, the facilitator should go around the table several times.

It is essential that the facilitator ensure the social interactions between team members during this stage of the process are ones of acceptance, respect and trust.

If necessary, the facilitator should briefly probe a team member who has raised a suggestion for more details or for further clarification.

Again, the recorder should capture the ideas that are generated in point form on the flip chart.

**Stage 4 should take no more than 10 minutes.**

## **STAGE 5:**

### **SELECTING STRATEGIES**

The facilitator should then briefly orient team members to the fifth stage of the process. Here, the referring teacher will have an opportunity to select those suggestions that seem to hold out the greatest promise of immediately addressing the issue at hand.

The selection process can be informal. For instance, the facilitator might simply ask the referring teacher whether any of the ideas look promising and, if so, which ones. The recorder places a check beside these ideas.

The selection process might also be more structured. In such an approach, the referring teacher could be invited to rank each of the suggestions that the team has put forward. The referring teacher assigns the numeral "1" for each of the ideas that he or she believes might be immediately applicable. The recorder places the numeral beside the relevant suggestions. The referring teacher assigns the numeral "2" for ideas that look promising but are less of a priority for the time being. The referring teacher assigns the numeral "3" to ideas that he or she has already tried or that do not seem practicable for other reasons, at the present time.

*The referring teacher is not expected to justify these selections to other group members.* However, the points that he or she should consider while assigning priority to the suggestions are:

- The suggestion should be simple and "do-able".
- The suggestion should be as non-intrusive and non-aversive as possible for both student and teacher. Ideally, the suggestion would require modifying, adapting or building upon present behaviours (or teaching methods or behaviour management strategies) rather

than calling for entirely new behaviours, methods, skills or strategies to be learned.

- Where the suggestion involves the student or teacher developing new skills, the skill development should fit into the present classroom structure and routines as much as possible.
- The suggestion should focus on accentuating the positive rather than on controlling and suppressing the student.
- The suggestion should hold promise of immediately helping in the situation at hand.

Naturally, the team members should also bear these points in mind while framing their suggestions.

The critical point of the exercise is for the referring teacher to identify the suggestions that are most helpful. The facilitator should ensure that the referring teacher is put at ease during the process and does not become bogged down in deciding whether to assign a 2 or a 3 to a given point.

**The facilitator should ensure that this stage of the process takes no longer than five minutes.**

## STAGE 6:

### ESTABLISHING AN ACTION PLAN

Having established priorities, the sixth stage of the process ensures that an action plan is developed so that the suggestions given priority will be carried over into practice.

The facilitator plays a lead role in organizing and setting the plan to paper.

The facilitator should work to ensure that as many of the essential details as possible are drafted during the problem solving session. The recorder will be an important aid to the facilitator in the process.

To begin, the facilitator summarizes the general aim of the meeting and the particular objectives the referring teacher wants to achieve in relation to the student. The facilitator then summarizes the key suggestions that the referring teacher has agreed to try. It is important that as many of those points as possible be clearly specified in the plan before the problem solving session ends.

The facilitator should then invite the referring teacher to map out the specific actions or techniques that he or she will use to implement various suggestions in the plan. The referring teacher should be specific about such details relating to implementation as the time of day and the settings or the subject areas in which the strategies will be implemented.

If others on the team are to play a role with the teacher during the implementation of the plan, the facilitator should ensure that these responsibilities are clearly defined in the plan.

During the problem solving meeting, only two minutes are reserved for planning. This means that ***the referring teacher and the facilitator must continue the planning process sometime after the team meeting.*** In addition, the referring teacher may need to consult with a specialist before some of the details of the plan can be fully fleshed out. The facilitator should establish a convenient date and time for these follow-up meetings to occur.

It is also important that, at a later time, the referring teacher reviews with team members how the implemented plan has made a difference to the problem situation. This review component of the plan is an important

measure that helps to ensure teacher accountability of the plan. Perhaps just as important, the opportunity to review the results with team members can give the referring teacher a sense of ongoing support from colleagues.

Before the problem solving session ends, the facilitator should clarify who, if any, of the team members will need to be involved in subsequent planning and follow-up. The facilitator should ensure that the team members who will be involved understand clearly what role they will play.

To expedite planning, it has been found helpful for the facilitator to bring a blank plan outline to the problem solving meeting. A copy of such a guide to planning is provided in the Tool Kit at the back of this manual (Tool 1). This model outline should be viewed as a flexible and adaptable guide to planning. The planning instruments that problem solving teams use should be consistent with team members' personalities and with the procedures and routines in their particular school or district.

**The Facilitator must ensure that this Stage lasts only 2-3 minutes.**

### **STAGE 7:**

#### **CLOSING THE MEETING**

Having moved efficiently through Stages 1 to 6, the problem solving team, guided by the facilitator, will have:

- listened attentively to, and gained insight into, a difficult situation faced by a colleague;
- drawn from their own experiences and shared their ideas in a spirit of collaboration, openness, mutual respect and support;

## **TEACHERS HELPING TEACHERS**

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- gained insight into the unique perspectives, skills and creativity of fellow colleagues;
- helped a colleague identify a set of options that hold immediate promise of addressing a difficult situation;
- participated in the development of an action plan that will result in creative ideas being put to practice and in collegial feedback on the results of those suggestions.

For his or her part, the referring teacher will have:

- broken through the feeling of isolation that often accompanies a frustrating problem;
- gained access to a wealth of positive, "do-able" ideas which he or she may not previously have known about;
- gained insight into the unique perspectives, skills and creativity of fellow colleagues;
- gained the needed personal confidence and skills to rise to a difficult challenge;
- felt empowered and supported by colleagues to address that challenge;
- recognized that his or her colleagues will be there in the future to provide feedback and advice.

This is a great deal to achieve in 30 minutes! Moreover, participants in these meetings often report that there are many positive ripple effects. The solutions developed in one meeting may be relevant to many problems faced not only by the referring teacher but by other team members as well.

The facilitator has good reason, then, to thank all participants. The facilitator should close with an up-beat message that meetings such as this eventually lead to constructive results.

**The Facilitator must end the meeting in the 30 minutes agreed to with participants.**

## **CONCLUSION**

The **Teachers Helping Teachers** approach is an effective and efficient way of addressing many of the more frustrating challenges in education. It is entirely consistent with broad trends in education. For example, educational budgets have been shrinking. The dollars that are available for staff development are scarce. This is a good alternative that involves pooling and sharing the considerable expertise that is already available in the educational system.

**Teachers Helping Teachers** is also consistent with the trend towards building greater school-based expertise. Funding is becoming increasingly scarce for bringing outside experts into the educational system. Once an expert leaves a school for another situation, their expertise often leaves with them. The costs can be considerable and the long-term benefits questionable. In contrast, the **Teachers Helping Teachers** approach can be systematically used to cultivate in-house expertise that is grounded in the unique realities of particular schools.

Aside from its use in helping teachers address particular problems, **Teachers Helping Teachers** can also be adapted to focus on emerging instructional trends and issues. For example, when a new approach to language development is reported in an educational journal, the **Teachers Helping Teachers** approach can be used to address the question, "How could we, as a team of teachers, implement this idea in our classrooms?" Ideas can be brainstormed, department heads can establish priority strategies and these strategies can be implemented and modified as required.

In addition, teaching staff can use this method to devise ways and means of developing particular skills that the educational authority or school principal has targeted as key teacher competencies. In whatever way it is applied, **Teachers Helping Teachers** is proving to be an effective means of fostering excellence and teamwork in education.

**THE  
TEACHERS HELPING TEACHERS  
TOOL  
KIT**



## **TOOL 1 - PROBLEM SOLVING TEAM MEETING**

### **A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

<b>FACILITATOR:</b>	
<b>REFERRING TEACHER:</b>	
<b>STUDENT:</b>	
<b>DATE OF MEETING:</b>	<b>TIME:</b>

<b>TEAM MEMBERS:</b>	<b>Email</b>
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<b>ISSUE(S) TO BE ADDRESSED:</b>
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**B. PARTICULAR OBJECTIVE(S):**

**What does the referring teacher want the student to do that the student is not doing now?**

**C. STUDENT PROFILE**

<b>STUDENT STRENGTHS</b>	<b>STUDENT NEEDS</b>

## D. STRATEGIES TRIED TO DATE

What strategies has the referring teacher tried?

## E. NEW STRATEGIES SELECTED

HIGH PRIORITY STRATEGIES (1 - 5)	WHO?	ACTION?	WHEN?
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			

## F. FOLLOW-UP SCHEDULE

<b>1. CONTINUATION OF PLANNING SESSION</b>		
<b>WHERE?</b>	<b>WHO?</b>	<b>WHEN?</b>
<b>2. FOLLOW-UP MEETING WITH REFERRING TEACHER AND PROBLEM SOLVING TEAM</b>		
<b>WHERE?</b>	<b>WHO?</b>	<b>WHEN?</b>
<b>3. WHAT OTHER ACTION?</b>		
<b>WHERE?</b>	<b>WHO?</b>	<b>WHEN?</b>
<b>SUMMARY COMMENTS:</b>		

## **TOOL 2 - FACILITATOR PROCESS GUIDE**

STAGE	FACILITATOR ACTIONS	MINUTES
<b>1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. If necessary, briefly outline the problem solving process.</li> <li>2. Ask a team member to be recorder.</li> <li>3. Briefly orient team members to problem.</li> <li>4. Help referring teacher to concisely explain the problem.</li> <li>5. If necessary, provide background details.</li> </ul>	<b>3</b>
<b>2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ask referring teacher to provide particulars.</li> <li>2. Do not allow team members to ask questions at this point.</li> <li>3. Ensure recorder is accurately summarizing essential points.</li> <li>4.</li> </ul>	<b>3</b>
<b>3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Explain purpose: to help team members to create their own mental picture of the issue.</li> <li>2. Invite team members in sequence to question the referring teacher.</li> <li>3. Allow team members to pass if they have no questions.</li> <li>4. Redirect questions that criticize the referring teacher.</li> <li>5. Redirect suggestions.</li> </ul>	<b>4</b>
<b>4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Explain purpose: to brainstorm constructive ideas.</li> <li>2. Invite team members in sequence (excluding referring teacher) to offer brief and practical suggestions.</li> <li>3. Ensure members direct suggestions to facilitator, not to referring teacher.</li> <li>4. Allow members to pass as required.</li> <li>5. Keep the focus on simple, "do-able", non-intrusive options that accentuate the positive and that can be implemented immediately.</li> <li>6. Ensure climate of respect and acceptance.</li> <li>7. Probe for clarification as needed.</li> </ul>	<b>12</b>

<b>5</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>1. Explain purpose:</b> to enable referring teacher to select workable ideas.</li><li><b>2. Invite referring teacher to select ideas</b> (see manual for informal or more structured procedure).</li><li><b>3. Ensure that referring teacher does not feel required to justify his or her selections.</b></li><li><b>4. Watchwords:</b> simple, immediately "do-able", non-intrusive, positive.</li></ol>	<b>5</b>
<b>6</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>1. Explain purpose:</b> to begin developing a plan.</li><li><b>2. Invite referring teacher to map out details of implementation strategy.</b> Ensure roles, responsibilities, time-frames are identified.</li><li><b>3. Arrange for follow-up planning time.</b></li><li><b>4. Establish follow-up meeting time with all team members.</b></li></ol>	<b>2</b>
<b>7</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>1. Wrap up by pointing to what has been achieved in the meeting.</b></li><li><b>2. Thank team members.</b></li></ol>	<b>1</b>

## TOOL 3

### Some References

Chalfant, J.C.; Pysch, M. and Moultrie, R. (1979) "Teacher Assistance Teams: A model for within-building problem solving." *Learning Disabilities Quarterly*, 2(3), pp. 85-96.

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For information on training, contact:

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