
Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships. (Organizational Structures) *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents (AMLE)*

The ways schools organize teachers and group and schedule students have a significant impact on the learning environment. The interdisciplinary team of two or more teachers working with a common group of students in a block of time is the signature component of high performing schools, literally the heart of the school from which other desirable programs and experiences evolve. Although sometimes perceived primarily as an organizational arrangement, teaming must be much more. The team is the foundation for a strong learning community characterized by a sense of family. Students and teachers on the team become well acquainted, feel safe, respected, and supported, and are encouraged to take intellectual risks.

Research indicates that effective interdisciplinary teams lead to improved student achievement, increased parental contacts, an enhanced school climate, and positive student attitudes. Experience has shown that small teams of two or three teachers are most effective in achieving these benefits. Furthermore, teaming has a positive impact on the professional lives of teachers, expanding a collegial focus. Whether organized formally or not, teachers of a particular subject must have regular opportunities to meet.

Daily or regular common planning time is essential so that teams can plan ways to integrate the curriculum, analyze assessment data, examine student work, discuss current research, and reflect on the effectiveness of instructional approaches being used. Addressing the concerns of individual students and day-to-day management details are important topics on a team's addenda but should be in balance with the essential work of considering curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

A schedule that provides large blocks of class time enables teaching teams to conduct valuable learning experiences such as field trips, debates, mock trials, community-based service activities, and science experiments not possible in the usual single period. In such a block schedule, a few students can be provided remedial support and others can be freed to do enrichment activities without interfering with the ongoing program. On occasion, two or three teams or an entire grade level can meet together during the block.

In exemplary middle schools, teachers who work together on a team design and operate much of the program, collaborating across teaching specialties and sharing responsibility for literacy development, advocacy, and student life. They take advantage of opportunities to vary the use of time, space, staff, and grouping arrangements to achieve success for every student. Team leaders represent their teams on a school-wide leadership group that sets direction, provides feedback, and advances school improvement efforts.

Beyond Interdisciplinary Teaming: Findings and Implications of the NASSP National Middle Level Study

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“Reforming middle grades programs must be driven by student achievement. While changing and modifying organizational patterns and refining and strengthening curriculum and assessment are essential, they are not sufficient. **Teams are not implemented just to have teams.** Grouping is not modified just to change practice. **Such changes take place because they contribute to greater student achievement and success.** (p. 15)” (34)

“In the past few decades, one characteristic has emerged as a defining feature of the exemplary middle level school: interdisciplinary teaming. Described as a “signature practice” in the middle school movement (Valentine et al., 1993, p. 49), teaming provides an organizational frame- work through which schools can design and deliver effective learning to every student.” (34)

“We also include recommendations to assist administrators and faculty members in moving beyond the simple formation of teams to the development of teaming practices that promote improved student achievement.” (34)

“Teams allow smaller communities to form within the school, fostering supportive relationships among students (Jackson & Davis, 2000). However, **teams have another important responsibility—the successful delivery of the core curriculum to students.** According to the National Middle School Association (NMSA), developmentally responsive middle level schools should provide a “curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory” (NMSA, 1995, p. 20). **In contrast to a disciplinary approach that maintains distinct subject boundaries, curriculum integration connects class-room learning to real-life experiences that occur across disciplines** (Beane, 1996; NMSA, 1995; Toepfer, 1992). Jackson and Davis (2000) noted, “For schools that understand the power of the big ideas for deepening the curriculum within disciplines, using that power to show connections across disciplines is a logical step.” (39-40)

“2. Team sizes should be smaller. Given the emerging research pointing to the effectiveness of small team sizes in promoting improved achievement (Flowers et al., 2000b), the trend toward teams of five to six (or more) teachers should be carefully evaluated. **Smaller student teams reinforce a more personalized learning environment, in the process facilitating improved communication and coordination among teachers and students.** Bishop and Stevenson (2000) advocated the use of two or three person “partner teams,” arguing “most teams are still too large and fractured by master schedules and other external factors to fully achieve their potential” (p. 14). **Because teachers teach more than one subject in these smaller team arrangements, it is also easier to integrate the curriculum** (Jackson & Davis, 2000).” (43)

“5. **The school’s scheduling model should empower the team.** Only 42% of middle level schools participating in this study used interdisciplinary scheduling (daily period

and alternating-day models) as their primary scheduling model. As a result, a high percentage of teams in this sample face the challenges of creatively achieving curriculum integration while operating within the constraints of departmentalized scheduling models. **A scheduling structure should support teachers' efforts to deliver quality education to students, and a poorly designed schedule can be more hindrance than help to teachers** (Hackmann & Valentine, 1998)." (44)

"The development of effective teams is an evolutionary process (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Because high-performing teams do not simply happen overnight, their success depends on the support of both teachers and administrators. As team teachers strive to establish nurturing and effective learning environments for students, they also enhance their collaboration skills and learn how to become interdependent professionals (Maeroff, 1993). School leaders also must be aware of their critical role in promoting effective teaming practices (Turk, Wolff, Waterbury, & Zumalt, 2002)." (45)¹

Best Practices for Middle School Scheduling and Grouping: Report from the Hanover Research Council, February 2009

"An article published in the *Middle School Journal* in the fall of 2000, outlines the results of research measuring effective classroom practices, including interdisciplinary teaming, at 70 middle-grade schools in Michigan. The 70 schools were part of the Center for Prevention Research and Development's (CPRD) School Improvement Self-Study in 1994-95, 1996- 97, and 1998-99. Together, these schools accounted for a total of nearly 2,000 teachers and 23,000 students. **This research, as well as other studies, illustrates the important effects that use of interdisciplinary teams has on student success. Michigan schools in the study that utilized the teaming model showed —improved work climate, more frequent contact with parents, increased teacher job satisfaction, and higher levels of student achievement.**² **In the study, coordinated, team-level activities corresponded with classroom-level integration and interdisciplinary practices, demonstrating how closely related these practices are.** For schools to coordinate team curriculums successfully, **teachers must be willing to integrate interdisciplinary approaches at the classroom level.** Schools that had the highest levels of curriculum coordination and interdisciplinary practices often also provided teachers with a common planning time in which they could share teaching ideas and establish team strategies.¹¹" (8-9)

"In addition to common planning time, **research showed that smaller student team sizes (ideally, 90 or fewer students) and longer periods of time devoted to team-based activities, correlated with greater improvements in student achievement.** Schools that had used a team approach for four or more years showed significantly higher levels of collaborative classroom activities than those schools that had only used the teaming model for three or fewer years, implying that teams improve quickly in the course of a few short years and continue to improve as they stay together." (9)

¹ Beyond Interdisciplinary Teaming: Findings and Implications of the NASSP National Middle Level Study; NASSP Bulletin • Vol. 86 No. 632 September 2002

“There is mounting evidence supporting the positive impact of interdisciplinary teaming on middle-grade students. In one recent study, **schools that used more teaming activities, common planning time, small teams, and advisory periods also showed higher levels of student achievement and self-esteem.** Another study found that **schools utilizing the teaming model demonstrated improvement in student self-reported outcomes (e.g., depression, self-esteem, behavior problems, and academic efficacy) as well as dramatic improvements in student achievement scores.**” (9)

“Teams can range from two teachers and 40 to 60 students to [four] teachers [and 100-120 students]...**Students on smaller teams are able to create closer teacher- student relationships and become better acquainted with their teammates. In addition, coordination is less complex with smaller teams.**” (10)

Effects of Interdisciplinary Teaching Team Configuration upon the Social Bonding of Middle School Students: RMLE Online, Research in Middle Level Education³

“Wentzel (1994) explains, “children’s academic achievement in middle school is related significantly to their levels of emotional distress and self-restraint” (p. 278). **Smaller teams not only increase the number of opportunities for teachers to assist their students in their development of positive self-concept and self-control, but they also increase the degree of the consistency of this assistance. The additional time smaller teams afford teachers to interact with students enables them to go beyond the “quick fix” discipline model to an approach that allows the student to better process his/her decision-making.** Teachers can better employ intervention strategies designed to develop a student’s internal rather than external locus of control. Programs, such as those based on Glasser’s (1998) Choice Theory, promote such an internal locus of control, thus providing students with interpersonal skills that help them assess their choices in meeting their own needs as well as the needs of the group.”

The Glossary of Education Reform: Comprehensive Online Resource

Teaming

“While the term *team* may be applied to a variety of organizational and instructional practices in a school, the most common application of the term ***teaming* refers to pairing a group of teachers (typically between four and six) with a group of sixty to eighty students.** Proponents of the strategy believe that teaming allows teachers to discuss the students they have in common and to establish stronger teacher-student relationships based on an improved understanding of the students and their specific learning needs. In most cases, a team will be built around the core-subject-area teachers in English language arts, math, science, and social studies, but the particular composition of teams may vary widely from school to school. Guidance counselors, special-education teachers, and other specialists are commonly assigned to teams. While teaming may be structured differently from school to school, there are two general forms: *horizontal teaming*, the grouping of students and teachers at a particular grade level, and *vertical teaming*, which is the

³ RMLE Online—Volume 30, No. 5; <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ801120.pdf>

continuation of a horizontal team across multiple grades, such as the seventh and eighth grades or ninth and tenth grades. With vertical teaming, the student group typically remains intact, while the team of teachers assigned to them changes. Vertical teaming may also be called *looping*, a term that specifically refers to the practice of grouping students with the same teacher (in the elementary grades) or group of teachers (in the upper grades) for two or more years. The general goal of teaming is to provide a more **personalized learning experience** for students—i.e., to ensure that students are well known by adults in the school, that their learning needs are understood and addressed, and that they receive the social, emotional, and **academic support** from teachers and staff that they need to succeed academically and remain in school. While teaming is widely used in middle schools, it is becoming a more common strategy for grouping students and determining course assignments in high school. Since educators typically see more students struggling with behavior and attendance, failing courses, or dropping out during the first two years of high school, teaming is often used as a proactive strategy for addressing these trends. While teaming is sometimes used in the upper grades of high school, it is far less common during these years, in part because **teaming is based on the specific developmental needs of students in their early adolescence. During these years, having consistent, supportive, understanding relationships with teachers and adults appears to have a positive effect on learning, emotional growth, and social development.** Teaming is one of many strategies educators may use to achieve these ends.

Reform

Teaming is an alternative to more traditional ways of organizing a school's academic program. Historically, students in middle schools and high schools have been dispersed across several different courses and teachers, which makes it more difficult for teachers to develop strong and understanding relationships with students (mainly because the time they could spend with any particular student was limited). And when students are dispersed across courses, it is more logistically challenging for teachers to discuss the students they share or work collaboratively to address a particular student's academic troubles and learning needs. With teaming, it may be logistically easier for a group of teachers to schedule regular meetings and discuss the students they have in common, often in the form of a **professional learning community**. **Team teachers may meet to review student-performance data, discuss which teaching methods are working for some students and which are not, plan appropriate support strategies for students, and develop lessons and projects collaboratively. When designed and executed successfully, teaming can also foster greater collaboration among teachers, provide a feeling of continuity and mentorship for students, and create a stronger sense of community and belonging among students.**"⁴

Middle School Practices Improve Student Achievement in High Poverty Schools by Steven B. Mertens & Nancy Flowers, September 2003

“What lessons for classroom teachers, principals, or policymakers emerge from this explanation of the connection between team and classroom practices and student

⁴ <http://edglossary.org/teaming/>

achievement? First, schools have very little control over the demographics of their student populations. As this study demonstrates, income levels of student families is still the predominant influence on student achievement. The majority of these schools have very high numbers of low-income students that dramatically affects their student achievement scores. However, schools can ameliorate this situation through several combined factors. First, the implementation of interdisciplinary teaming and common planning time is critical to increasing levels of practices. Second, higher (i.e., more frequent) levels of team and classroom practices are associated with higher achievement. **The final factor in this study influencing student achievement is experience. When teachers are engaged in teaming for several years, and have the necessary time to plan, they report higher levels of team and classroom practices. Therefore the sustained impact of teaming and higher classroom practices can produce higher student achievement. This is not a short-term process,** particularly for high poverty schools. As observed in this study, schools with high percentages of low income students can and do develop high levels of team and classroom practices through sustained implementation of teaming and common planning time. Research such as this provides evidence that middle grades programs and practices can positively affect student achievement as measured by standardized test scores.”⁵

School Research Partnership Projects and Policy Briefs 2012: Middle School Scheduling: through Duke University School Research Partnerships⁶

“National Overview: Best Scheduling Practices”

The literature on middle school scheduling highlights the best practices of high-achieving middle schools across the nation. Three scheduling strategies emphasized throughout the publications are as follows:

- (1) Implementing flexible scheduling
- (2) Incorporating interdisciplinary teaming
- (3) Facilitating a global education curriculum. (2)

Highly successful middle schools (HSMS), schools recognized as Schools to Watch by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform or as Breakthrough Middle Schools by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, **demonstrated higher levels of interdisciplinary teaming than the schools in the sample of randomly selected middle schools [9]. Most of the higher-performing middle schools are organized into teams, with core academic subject teachers teaching the same group of approximately 100 students [10].**

Why do successful middle schools adopt interdisciplinary teaming?

- Teaming fosters more integrated instruction and provides the flexibility to meet diverse student needs [11].
- Common planning time for teachers in teams enables them to work on the

⁵ [http://www.cprd.illinois.edu/files/MSJ%20article%20\(Sep%202003\).pdf](http://www.cprd.illinois.edu/files/MSJ%20article%20(Sep%202003).pdf)

⁶ http://childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu/pdfs/schoolresearch/2012_PolicyBriefs/Park_Policy_Brief.pdf

curriculum together.

- Teaming in the context of flexible scheduling allows information taught in one class to be reinforced or applied in another [12].
- Teachers in teams can talk about specific students and how the team can work with the students to improve their performance. (3)