

Creating Collaborative Teams for Improving Student Achievement

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Establishing highly effective teams in schools can have a significant impact on student achievement. Teams use data analysis to drive instruction, identify gaps in curriculum within and across grade levels, which in turn develops a viable “living” curriculum. Teams work collaboratively as learners; they learn of their student’s specific needs, school-wide needs, and learn strategies to help students overcome obstacles by sharing strategies with their peers. This is an aspect of a Professional Learning Community, or PLC, where a school culture of collaboration and learning benefits students and teachers alike.

Collaboration among teachers is one of the most effective ways to improve student learning. When teachers share information, resources and skills, work together to problem solve, and create a viable curriculum using data-driven decisions, student achievement increases. High performing teams communicate effectively horizontally and vertically with the PLC foundation:

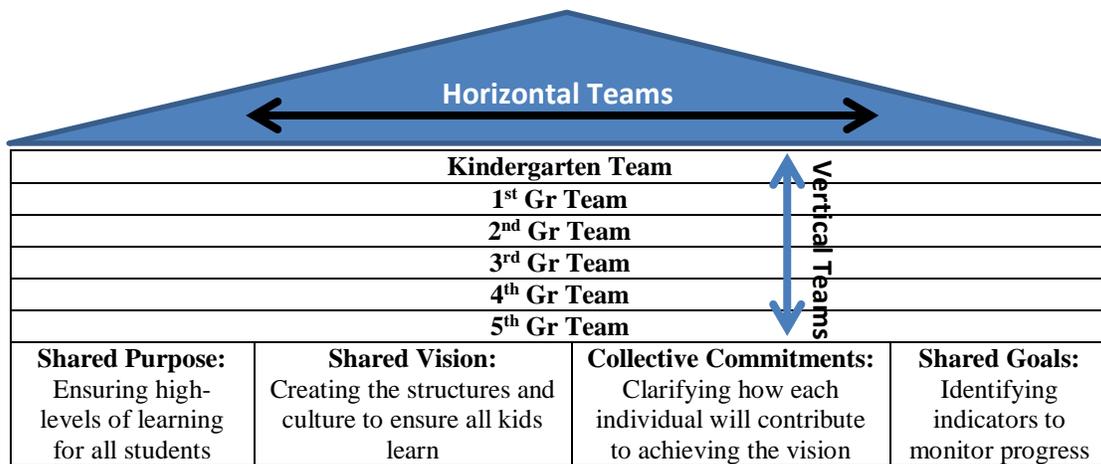


Table 1.0 (DuFour, R., 2011, p. 166)

Differences in content coverage, skill development and grading within the same grade level are common in schools where teachers work in isolation. Two students in the same grade but with

different class teachers may get similar results on a standardized test, while having significantly different classroom grades in that same subject. This can be due to many variables, such as a teacher's grade policy, infrequent assessing, student work expectations, criterion in identifying achievement, depth of curricular coverage, or different teaching strategies. Even with curriculum maps and rubrics, the individual teacher is the most significant factor in student achievement and variations are going to happen while working in isolation. Gaps within grade levels are widened over years as students continue to proceed through each grade level, falling farther and farther behind. Grade levels teams work on vertical alignment (subject-based such as a K-8th Math Team, or interdisciplinary such as a Middle School Team) to cross reference horizontal work and remove gaps in learning school-wide. The following is a suggested model to begin this process:

1. Principals must have a strong understanding how effective teams work, data analysis and the PLC process. Some resources and trainings are offered on www.allthingsplc.info.
2. Board presentations should be done to ensure buy-in from the board and support for initiatives that may require their approval, such as budgetary increases for staff development.
3. Meet with key people in your building (circle of influence) to discuss the initiative. "A principal benefits by working through the issues with a small group of key staff members and securing them as allies before engaging the entire faculty" (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, 2010, p. 21) Find teacher leaders that will support the process and move things forward. Principals should share the benefits of such an approach to inspire teachers and help them see how they will become better educators. Choose members that are strongly committed and work well with people. These individuals will make up the Leadership Team.

4. Decide which teams should be established based on school needs. If you find that many students are struggling with writing, a Language Arts Team should be one to consider. It's best to start with one or two teams initially. It is possible to start with a vertical alignment before horizontal as gaps can be identified across grade levels and then teachers within grade levels can work together to standardize their work.
5. Train the Leadership Team on how to serve as a liaison between the team members and administration. They initiate collective commitments to establish team norms, help establish SMART goals, and develop, monitor and evaluate the team's action plan to achieve goals. Empower them with additional staff development that focuses on the PLC, data analysis and team building. Provide additional planning time for them.
6. Seek school-wide support from the staff by reinforcing a shared purpose and vision for student achievement. According to Kotter (1996), "a strong, guided coalition is always need – one with a high level of trust and shared objectives that appeal to both head and heart" (p. 52). Monitor attitudes towards the concept that all students can learn. This will take time, depending on what your current school culture fosters. Present the initiative along with other members of the Leadership Team in a stepwise manner, ensuring they feel they are supported throughout the process. Select members from the staff to be on specific teams.
7. Ensure collaborative time is scheduled during school hours.

Though the Principal should attend some meetings, they are more focused on meeting with the Leadership Team to monitor progress and provide support. It is important that the Principal does not take over the team meetings. Distributing leadership by letting others "own" the meeting empowers teacher-leaders. Shared responsibility establishes interdependency rather than dependency. Principals focus on establishing environments where everyone on the team is

heard, request feedback through surveys, and a have non-defensive approach obstacles are brought up or administrative short-comings are identified. Principals need to keep in mind that it is not a matter of whether they agree that negative feedback is true or false; rather it is how another perceives it.

Collaborative Team Processes

Establish team commitment and norms – Teams create statements to describe what their team is about. For example, the Quran Team’s vision is to “develop a love for the Book of Allah in so that a student is always connected to its divine message and pursuant of maintaining an attachment in their hearts throughout their lives”. Team norms are identified as:

- Meet on time
- Have an agenda
- Have minutes
- Ensure everyone is heard
- Be prepared for meetings
- Ensure everyone has a role

Collect data – Gather information (standardized tests, benchmark and unit tests, etc.) across grade levels for vertical teams and horizontally for within grade levels. Data from multiple years of testing should be used. Compare apples to apples; ensure that assessments are aligned using the same level of higher order thinking and question types. This is more challenging if teams use teacher-created tests that were made in isolation and expected to be compared to another teacher’s assessment results. If you find that you need more data, decide as a team which type of data you need to collect and create a timeline for creating/purchasing, administrating and scoring them. Ensure that the assessments are aligned by grade level or within grade levels.

Analyze data – While many testing agencies do most of the analysis for you, teams will decide *how* they will look at the data. Teams can decide how to divide this process; individual teachers can analyze data for the lowest performing areas for their class and share it with their team members to look for trends within and across grade levels. Here teams will find clarity in where the school has a strong academic emphasis and where they have needs. It is important that teams avoid assumptions based on opinions unless they have the data to back it up.

SMART Goal planning – Based on the analyzing results of the team’s work, teams will choose a Strategic, Measurable, Attainable, Result-oriented, Time-bound (SMART) goal. For example, a team discovers 60% of students achieve the school’s target goal of 85% mastery at each grade level for solving word problems. The team establishes a SMART goal: “To increase the percentage of students who achieve the target goal of 85% mastery in math word problem solving on assessments done mid-year and end of the year from 60% to 80%”. Oftentimes our goals are vague, are not time-bound, and don’t clarify exactly what the team is looking for (measurable). Teams establish strategy/action steps, distribute responsibility among team members, establish timelines, and identify evidence of effectiveness for each SMART Goal (see appendix for template). Schools may realize during this process that additional support is needed to enrich and extend learning for some students. Administrative support is critical during this time; if teams have worked hard to identify a need and the Principal does not respond supportively, whether it’s to establish an after-school tutoring program, teacher aid support, developing RTI in the building, the team momentum will quickly die out.

The following table shows results of proficiency levels in 4th grade: writing informative/explanatory texts (Common Core WHST.6-8.1):

Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4
73% of students are proficient	100% of students are proficient	100% of students are proficient	52% of students are proficient

Examples of Some Team Strategies:

- Establish a SMART goal of 90% of all 4th grade students to reach proficiency levels in explanatory writing texts by the end of the year evident on the state exams in May.
- Are teachers 1-4 testing standards the *same* way? Is teacher 1's test considered a high-level critical thinking assessment while teacher 2 is using multiple choice tests? To target gaps in learning, difficulty levels in assessments must also be aligned within grade levels. This team develops formative and summative assessments, administer, grade and share the results to identify whether the gap is related to student knowledge or teaching/assessment strategies.
- Target the weaknesses; what part of writing explanatory texts are the students struggling with? If the team is unsure, they create common formative assessments that breakdown the steps of each component of explanatory writing in order to identify trends in student work where the challenges emerge.
- Student support: students struggling in the class of Teacher 1 and 4 can be grouped for Title I services. The Title I teacher would work 80 – 200 minutes a week with students, depending on their levels and needs, targeting the specific skills needed in writing. Implement intervention times for classroom teachers and their students by providing aides to work with the rest of the class while small groups work with teachers. The team may opt to establish a writing lab in each class as a center. Teacher 1 and 2 may swap

classes for a few days to teach each other's group with a strength they can support students with.

- Teacher support: Teachers learn about their students and learn from each other through Peer Coaching. Teacher 2 and 3 can coach Teacher 1 and 4. Perhaps there are teaching strategies that works well in meeting this standard. Each teacher observes the other teaching or Teacher 2 & 3 teach Teacher 1 & 4's classes while the classroom teachers observe and later come together to discuss their experience. Studies have shown that "there is not one way to teach effectively, but many" (Stigler & Hielbert, 2009, p. 34)

Despite the fact that Teacher 2 and 3 have 100% proficiency in their classes, these teachers are equally concerned for all students. As part of the team's values, accepting that "all students are our students" strengthens teams and provides for a nurturing environment school-wide.

Challenges

Though few would disagree that there are benefits of establishing a culture of collaboration, schools sometimes avoid this process as it poses challenges, such as lack of time and resources, and burn-out of teams.

Establishing collaboration time initially seems difficult, but ways to implement this during the days just requires some creativity. Considering that effective teams should meet about 90 minutes a week, it would be difficult for teachers to work more hours after-school to collaborate. If master schedules 1) schedule subjects to be taught at the same time for each grade and 2) schedule specials during the same period, teachers that teach the same content area will be free for collaborative meetings during the same time while the special teachers have their students (see sample schedule). If more staff is needed to work with students, schools should look into

recruiting college students, high school interns, guidance and administrators for providing additional support for intervention or enrichment activities for students. They can work with students by placing them into flexible groups as a way to group students based on needs while their content teachers meet to collaborate.

Discussions on how to allocate existing resources should include administrators and team members as creativity will be the key to resolving challenges. Schools can better allocate time, people, materials, and funds when multiple people with a shared vision put their minds together.

Teams can avoid burn-out by ensuring appropriate pacing, yet consistent work that show progress of the team's meetings. Disinterest in a team can be expected if little or no results are apparent. Team leaders must be vigilant about ensuring their team has created SMART goals, monitors their progress, and celebrating milestones. The Principal should work with the Leadership Team to ensure there is effective progress and improvement in student achievement. Teams continue through this process, allowing the realities of the student's progress over time to be the guiding principles behind teamwork.

Capacity building takes time, however, if we are serious about learning, the results are worth the work and wait. School-wide progress will be apparent among students and empowerment of teachers will be the school's norm.

“Capacity building...is not just workshops and professional development for all. It is the daily habit of working together, and you can't learn this from a workshop or course. You need to learn it by doing it and having mechanisms for getting better at it on purpose.” (Fullen, 2005)

Bibliography

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