

Leadership for Effective Teaming

The writers report on the findings of their research into the relationship between principal behavior and effective teaming.

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No practice defines the middle school more than teaming. It is the most prevalent organizational model in these schools and its wide acceptance is built on research showing that high-fidelity implementation has a direct correlation with increased student achievement and improved school climate (Felner *et al.* 1997; Flowers, Mertens, and Mulhall 1999, 2000a, 2000b).

Teaming is not a simple process—from either an implementation or a functional standpoint. Despite evidence of the importance of teaming, it continues to be implemented in a variety of ways. And while there is no agreement on the requirements for a successful team (*e.g.*, size or frequency of meetings), its success is the product of multiple factors, not the least of which is leadership.

There has been little research on the relationship between the work of the principal and the implementation of teaming. During our four-year study, we attempted to learn about the ways leader behaviors sustain effective teaming.

Perhaps the most important thing a principal can do to ensure success of teaming is to provide teams with common planning time. Our work in this area, along with that of other researchers, demonstrates that common planning time is the vehicle by which teams engage in the important conversations about student learning. The presence of common planning time accelerates the impact of the other factors; its absence decreases the impact of these same factors.

However, it is not enough to have common planning time. It also is important that the teams actually meet—optimally every day. If that is not possible, teams should meet at least three times each week.

Organizational Components

As a result of our work, we identified several things that principals can do to support teams and to sustain teachers' work with students. These actions are grouped into three categories.

Involvement with the Team. Principals in schools where we found a successful teaming model were actively involved with their teams. These principals met with their teams regularly, were comfortable suggesting strategies for team operations, and routinely worked with teams on curricular and instructional practices. These principals also encouraged teams to use a variety of grouping practices in their instruction.

The principals in our study were strong supporters of teaming. Thus, they prioritized

working with teams and incorporated their activities in support of teams as a norm in their weekly schedule. One principal said, “Unless I make it my first priority, other things will consume my day and my week.”

More than just meeting with their teams, these principals engaged team members in conversations about curricular and instructional issues. They worked to ensure that the primary conversation was about teaching and learning rather than student management issues such as student discipline or parent communication. While important, conversations about parent issues and student discipline were deemed secondary to the conversations about improving curriculum and instruction. One district near Chicago set aside two team meetings a week to discuss these topics exclusively.

Team Autonomy. Principals we studied supported effective teams by allowing team autonomy. Prior research on teaming described autonomy as:

- Supporting team decisions about student discipline;
- Encouraging the flexible use of the team’s instructional time;
- Providing a team budget;
- Allowing team members to make and change student schedules for team subjects; and
- Providing professional development on teaming practices.

Our work reinforced the importance of each of these practices. Although individual principals responded differently to the teams in their schools, as a group they reported that the model was more successful when they provided teams with autonomy. Teachers also reported that each of the five principal behaviors was important to effective team functioning.

Several principals described the need to support teams as they became more autonomous. One principal described the impact of autonomy when she said: “Of necessity, teams need to have the flexibility to respond—to use time differently, to use different instructional practices, to use their budgets differently. Every team must be autonomous if we [the staff] are to be successful with every child.”

Advocacy for Teaming. Principals play an important role in fostering good community relations. We found that principals in schools recognized as effective also were strong advocates for teaming, and that three specific principal actions could be considered the keys to the success of teaming:

- Talking regularly with individual parents, as well as groups of parents, about the importance of teaming and its impact on the educational experiences of students.
- Seeking out opportunities to talk with community groups about their school and their teaming model. (Principals regarded these conversations as an important way to build and sustain community support for the success of their students.)
- Advocating for teaming with other district administrators. (This included seeking support for the fiscal and human resources to nurture and sustain a teaming model.)

Principals support teaming by:

- Providing common planning time;
- Ensuring that their teams meet;
- Meeting regularly with the team;

- Suggesting strategies for team operations;
- Working with teams on curricular and instructional issues;
- Encouraging teams to use a variety of grouping practices;
- Supporting team decisions about student discipline;
- Encouraging the flexible use of instructional time;
- Providing a team budget;
- Providing staff development on teaming;
- Permitting teams to change student schedules in team classes;
- Talking with parents about the importance of teams;
- Speaking to parent and community groups about teaming; and
- Advocating for teaming with other district administrators.

The Decision to Team

Principals in our study were intentional in their decision to include teaming in their school. They arrived at the decision to team through processes that ranged from forming a task force to study best practices in the middle grades, to generating a consensus among the faculty. Regardless of the approach they took to adopting teaming, all the principals we studied were steadfast in their belief that teaming distinguishes the middle school experience. The centrality of teaming shaped all school operations. One principal summed it up by saying, "I believe that our teaming model is successful due to the fact that everything we do at our school revolves around the team."

References

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