

# Middle School Teams: Not in Name Only

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Okay, you've decided on your team name, schedule, homework policy, and destination for the annual field trip. Now it's time to examine the professional and personal sides of teaming. What core values do you share as a team? How will you deal with conflicts? What are the best ways to integrate different subjects? How can you nurture one another?

Middle school teams evolve. They begin with polite, but guarded relationships. After a few months, they encounter conflicts, control issues, sometimes stagnation. To deal with these rising concerns, teams must establish procedures, learn to communicate clearly, and give and take feedback. Finally, they will arrive at what one in-service I attended called "Mature Closeness." At this stage, the teams are open, resourceful, supportive, and effective. The same in-service session labeled the sequence "Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing." It rang true for several of the teams with which I've worked.

Effective middle school teams identify and communicate commonly held core values. In his 1993 book, *How to Bring Vision to School Improvement Through Outcomes, Commitments, and Beliefs*, Jon Saphier explained that a core value is one that drives the team's decisions. It should elicit strong reactions when it's violated. Saphier describes three kinds of core values: outcomes for students, commitments about how to work together, and beliefs about conditions for learning.

Here, are a few samples of core values we identified at Rachel Carson Middle School:

- All students belong to all of us.
- All students and staff are leaders.
- All students and staff can learn.
- All students and staff should have equal access to quality education.
- All students and staff shall learn in a safe, nurturing environment.
- All students, and staff merit trust and honor.
- We are here to nurture one another's successes.
- Conflict is opportunity, and we will work towards resolution.
- Positive risk-taking is highly valued.
- Mistakes should lead to learning.

Teams should focus on core values because these beliefs help teachers gain balance and direction. Saphier reminds us that core values help teams decide where to concentrate their most precious resource—time. Decisions can be made more easily without feeling territorial or betrayed because we all agree on the big picture: Is this in the best interest of students? Determining core values as a team, therefore, creates unparalleled collegiality. It's worth spending the time to develop those core beliefs.



All good teams need ground rules and structures in order to progress. Some suggestions:

- Rotate meeting places. When you meet in each other's rooms, you will learn more about your colleagues as instructors and people.
- Set an agenda and stick to it. Don't let the urgent overtake the important.
- Agree on start and stop times. Arrive promptly for meetings.
- Don't meet every day of the week. Assign different topics for different days. For example:  
Monday—Meet if needed. Tuesday—Team calendar, paperwork, and administrative issues.  
Wednesday—Curriculum and integration planning. Tuesday—Discuss students.  
Friday—Meet as needed.
- Hold parent conferences during the team meeting period, not after school or in the evenings unless it's an emergency.
- Celebrate achievements. Ensure that everyone is heard. No put-downs or cheap shots. Commit to the fact that all of you are on the same side. Remain non-accusatory, inviting, and emotionally neutral. (If you disagree, try saying, "It has been my experience that," instead of, "How could you think that way?")
- Keep team business inside the team.

After setting ground rules, most teams will have additional issues, such as confronting the team leader who doesn't delegate, dealing with teachers of elective courses who might feel left out, and spending too much time discussing student problems. Teams can more effectively address these problems if they agree about core values.

### GETTING TO THE CORE—CONTENT

Subject integration is a big benefit of teaming. The problem is that teams tend to get lost in state testing or an overloaded curriculum and lose sight of the goal: mastery of content and skills.

At this point in my teaching career, I've concluded that we cannot cover every aspect of the curriculum every year. I think we should stop feeling guilty about this and just teach as much as we can in the most effective manner possible. This is not a cavalier attitude. The proof is in my students' achievements and assessment scores. They show solid understanding of key concepts and they perform well on state tests.

Team coordination is important. Consider the science teacher who assigns a chapter on genetics to read over the weekend so students will be ready to proceed with the new unit next week. She throws in some study questions to answer as well. On the same team, the history teacher asks his students to watch a television special on the History Channel and summarize it by Monday. The English teacher requires her students to do the initial research for a project, and the math teacher assigns a lengthy set of algorithms to memorize and apply to real-life scenarios. Faced with the task of completing those disjointed assignments, students -- and their parents -- could justifiably throw up their hands in despair.



Instead of focusing on activities, middle school teachers will serve their subjects and students better by focusing on the larger skills they want students to attain. Students should logically progress, not leap, from unit to unit and activity to activity. After teachers step back and examine the essential and enduring skills they want students to master, they can make strong curricular connections.

Here's an example from our team: The Dawes Act of 1887 was intended as a humanitarian gift to Native Americans from the U.S. government. It gave Native Americans their own land if they lived in families and became U.S. citizens. However, it broke up tribal lands and forced Native Americans to live in certain locations because nomadic people didn't recognize the authority of the U.S. government. Rachel Milenski, the history teacher on my team, asked students to write letters from the American Indians to the Bureau of Indian Affairs protesting the Dawes Act. As the team's English teacher, I taught students how to write persuasive business letters. Going further, the math teacher asked students to enclose a population bar or line graph to support their arguments.

How did we assess the business letter? We put one grade on the letter and counted it in all three classes. I agree with educator and writer, William Zinsser, who says that we should give one grade for writing and another for thinking. We should give one grade for the whole package.

To improve subject integration on your team, list all the big concepts and skills you have to teach and compare the lists with one another. Look for those "Aha!" moments. See if you can find a larger concept that might unify several ideas. Some useful threads include independence, analysis cause and effect, transitions, authority, and self-sufficiency. Start off small -- look for connections between two subjects. If it goes well, try to connect another subject the next semester.

### RESOLVING DIFFERENCES

Be proactive about your team relationships. Discuss possible situations before they happen, giving each team member time to reflect without real pressures. Having a good conversation is the goal here, not resolving the problem.

Here are some discussion questions worth considering. After each one, ask "How would a high-performing middle level teacher respond?"

- More than half the class failed your test.
- One member of the team consistently assigns excessive homework. Students and teachers complain. The teacher says he is trying to toughen students for high school; if he reduces the number of assignments, he won't finish covering the curriculum.
- The school district mandates what you consider to be a new fad in education without a proven track record.
- Each day in the staff lunchroom, a colleague complains about a school program, a committee decision, or a staff member who is not present. She doesn't serve on any committees after school because she has a two-hour daily commute to work.
- A colleague on your team frequently yells at his students and assigns dull worksheets for homework. You disagree with both approaches but become very concerned when students come to you and complain about the teacher. You share your concerns during a team meeting, but find little support from your colleagues.

## Middle School Teams: Not in Name Only *(continued)*



Strong middle school teams don't get that way the first year. They persist and mature. They strive to attain peak performance. Reaching the summit is nice, but not nearly as illuminating as making the journey together.

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