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Interdisciplinary Teaming (May 2004)

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An interdisciplinary team consists of two or more teachers from different subject areas and the group of students they commonly instruct. Team teachers plan, coordinate, and evaluate curriculum and instruction across academic areas. Teams cultivate meaningful and regular communication with families. Teams often share the same schedule and the same area of the building. For teachers, teams provide a collaborative and supportive work group. For students, teams offer stable relationships with teachers and peers (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Seventy-nine percent of principals in middle level schools report that they had teams in 2000, up from 57% in 1992 (Valentine, Clark, Hackman, & Petzko, 2002).

Principles for organizing effective teams include:

1. Keep teams small in terms of number of teachers and students.
2. Provide sufficient individual and team planning time for teachers.
3. Allow teams to design their students' daily schedule.
4. Assign teams to their own area of the building.
5. Allow teams to work together for multiple years. (Erb & Stevenson, 1999)

Characteristics of highly effective teams include:

1. Student-centered focus.
2. Strong commitment to academic achievement.
3. Collaborative policies and accountability systems.
4. Strong sense of team community.
5. Regular communication with parents.
6. A proactive approach.
7. Teachers who work professionally and collaboratively. (George & Alexander, 2003)

The evidence supporting the positive impact of interdisciplinary teaming on middle grades schools and students is growing (Arhar, 1990; Arhar, Johnston, & Markle, 1989; Dickinson & Erb, 1997; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000; Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers, 1997; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999; George & Shewey, 1994; Lee & Smith, 1993). Students and teachers in schools that have implemented teaming and its associated practices with some degree of integrity consistently report more positive and productive learning environments (Arhar 1990, 1997; Dickinson & Erb, 1997; Lee & Smith, 1993). Several large-scale and comprehensive studies have been conducted that successfully demonstrate the positive effects of teaming on student outcomes. In one study, more highly implemented schools (e.g., teaming, common planning time, small teams, advisory) were found to have higher levels of student achievement and student self-esteem than less implemented schools (Felner et al., 1997). Another study found that schools that are fully engaged in teaming with high levels of common planning time show improvement in student self-reported outcomes (e.g., depression, self-esteem, behavior problems, academic efficacy). Further, student achievement scores improved dramatically, particularly for schools with high percentages of free/reduced lunch students (Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 1998).



Common planning time is deemed critical to the success of an interdisciplinary team because it provides teachers with an opportunity to plan collaboratively (Warren & Muth, 1995). Team teachers should have common planning meetings at least four times per week for at least 30 minutes per meeting (Flowers et al., 1999). At a basic level, teams utilize their common planning time to plan and coordinate team activities (e.g., homework, tests, schedules, special projects). At an advanced level, teams coordinate and integrate curriculum, instruction, and assessment during common planning time. Teachers' shared time should not come at the expense of their individual planning time. When common planning supplants individual time, collaborative work suffers because teachers are concerned with their own workloads (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

Schools structure and organize teams in different ways – there isn't just one acceptable model. Teams can include small partner (two-teacher) teams, three-teacher teams, four-teacher teams, or grade-wide teams (George & Alexander, 2003). Several key factors to consider when designing teams include the needs of your students, the number of students per grade, the division of teaching responsibilities, and the design of your building. To ensure a sense of smallness and to foster long-term student-teacher relationships, students can be assigned to teams in a variety of ways. The most prevalent strategies in middle schools include multiage grouping, looping, and schools-within-a-school (George & Lounsbury, 2000). Multiage grouping assigns students from two or more grades together on one team and within their classes. Looping is the practice of keeping students with the same teachers as they move through a middle school. The schools-within-a-school approach is often used in larger schools whereby the school is divided into houses or subgroups that enjoy autonomy and a sense of community that is difficult to attain across the entire school population.

Teams range in size from teams of two teachers and 40 to 60 students to teams of six teachers and 150 to 190 students. Recent experience has led more middle school leaders to favor smaller teams of two to three teachers (George & Alexander, 2003). In *Turning Points 2000*, Jackson and Davis say that teams should be no larger than five teachers and 125 students. The advantages of smaller teams include closer teacher-student relationships; students know each other better; and less complex coordination issues. Researchers have linked positive outcomes to smaller teams. On teams of 90 or fewer students, the use of desirable instructional practices and the quality of team interactions is higher than on larger teams (Flowers et al., 2000). Another study found that teams of 120 or fewer students with a ratio of no more than 25 students to one teacher engage in instructional practices that are linked to positive student outcomes more often than larger teams (Erb & Stevenson, 1999).

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