

ORIGINAL PAPER**Stronger Together: Maximizing Teaming in the Middle Grades**

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Abstract: Teaming has been an integral component of the middle school concept since its inception in the late 1960s. Whether interdisciplinary teams, professional learning communities, or grade level teams, teaming provides the organizational structure to address the unique needs of middle grades students and their schools. The purpose of this article is to introduce educators who may be unfamiliar with teaming to its purpose and benefits; the role of common planning time in fostering effective team use; the use of teaming to address school, teacher, and student needs; and keys to implementing teaming to maximize effectiveness. Sample schedules, meeting agendas, and potential topics and issues for team meetings are shared.

Keywords: *middle grades teaming, interdisciplinary team, professional learning communities*

Since the inception of the middle school model in the 1960s, teaming has served as the key organizational structure for meeting the needs of young adolescents. In fact, George and Alexander (2003) assert “the interdisciplinary team organization has been the most significant contribution of the middle school concept to the process of schooling” (p. 302). Though interdisciplinary teaming is the core structure in the middle grades (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), the ever-changing needs of schools have also led to the formation of other team organizations in middle grades, including grade-level teams and professional learning communities. All three of these team structures provide the organization to address the complex needs of students and the school community.

Simply defined, interdisciplinary teams are two or more teachers who “share the same group of students, the same part of the school building, the same schedule and planning time, and the responsibility for planning, teaching, and evaluating

curriculum and instruction” (George et al., 1998, pp. 248-249) in the core subjects of language arts, math, science, and social studies. Typically, team sizes range from two to five teachers, with four teacher teams being the norm. Professional learning communities (PLCs) consist of a group of educators who meet regularly to share their expertise and experiences on a specific topic (e.g., math, classroom management, teaching strategies) to improve their teaching and enhance student performance (DuFour, 2004). The size of PLCs varies, though a typical team size is from three to eight members. Finally, grade-level teams consist of all teachers from a specific grade level who meet to address school-wide and grade-level-specific issues. Grade-level teams function much like interdisciplinary teams and PLCs, but the issues being addressed require the input and expertise of all members of the grade level. When combined, these different team structures provide the foundation to meet students’ academic and developmental needs, foster

meaningful and engaging instruction, support school-wide initiatives, and support the professional development of teachers.

As more and more teachers enter the middle grades profession through alternative pathways, the need for professional development focused on the role of effective teaming in middle grades schools increases. The purpose of this article is to introduce educators who may be unfamiliar with teaming to its purpose and benefits; the role of common planning time in fostering effective team use; the use of teaming to address school, teacher, and student needs; and the implementation of teaming to maximize effectiveness.

Why use teaming?

There are numerous benefits for both teachers and students to use teaming in middle grade schools. Whether exploring interdisciplinary teams or professional learning communities, the impact of using teaming in middle grade schools has been overwhelmingly positive. From improved student performance to a more positive culture for students and teachers, numerous studies highlight positive impacts on middle school communities. Flowers et al. (1999) reveal interdisciplinary teaming leads to improved work climates, increased communication with parents, higher levels of job satisfaction, and higher levels of student achievement. The work of Capraro et al. (2016) also highlights increased levels of student achievement through the use of PLCs, as well as greater student accountability and ownership. Hart et al. (1992) show that teachers on interdisciplinary teams demonstrate enhanced communication and greater feelings of autonomy, decision-making, and ownership. In addition, Wallace (2007) indicates students on interdisciplinary teams have higher levels of relationships and social

bonding with their peers, and George and Alexander (2003) contend interdisciplinary teaming leads to more active student engagement and fewer disciplinary issues. When used effectively, teaming can have a positive impact.

Keys to Effective Teaming

Establish Clear Purpose and Vision for Teams. Effectively implementing and using teaming requires a focused effort where all stakeholders have a clear purpose and vision for the role teams will play in the school. It is essential for all school stakeholders to understand that teaming is a critical component of the school and must be made a priority. Establishing a teaming committee that can outline what teaming structures will be used, how they will be used, and the expectations to be followed is instrumental for success. Aligning specific tasks to the appropriate team helps members use time effectively and capitalize on the expertise in the meeting. For example, if a curriculum issue arises that only impacts 7th grade math teachers, creating a professional learning community for those specific individuals allows them the time to meet and address the issue. Whereas, if the school is exploring grading scales and late work policies to ensure consistency across all grade levels, assigning these tasks to grade level teams is the most efficient.

Ensure Common Planning Time is Provided and Protected. Common planning time plays a pivotal role in making sure teams are able to successfully meet and do their work. Kellough and Kellough (2008) define common planning time as “a regularly scheduled time during the school day when teachers who teach the same students meet for joint planning, parent conferences, materials preparation, and student evaluation” (p. 394). Providing this

time is critical to allow teachers time to address the different issues and tasks of teaching and meeting students' needs. Furthermore, making sure this time is protected and not subsumed into other school tasks and needs is important.

Incorporating a school schedule (see Figure 1) that allows two separate planning periods during the day for teachers can help foster the school environment needed for teams to thrive.

Figure 1 *Sample School Schedule*

	8:00 – 8:25	8:30 – 9:25	9:30 – 10:25	10:30 – 12:00	12:05 – 1:00	1:05 – 2:00	2:05 – 3:00
6 th Grade	Advisory	Core	Core	Lunch (10:30 – 11:00) & Encore Individual Planning	Encore & Team Planning	Core	Core
7 th Grade	Advisory	Core	Core	Core & Lunch (11:00 – 11:30)	Core	Encore & Team Planning	Encore & Individual Planning
8 th Grade	Advisory	Encore & Team Planning	Encore & Individual Planning	Core & Lunch (11:30 – 12:00)	Core	Core	Core

One of those planning periods is individual planning, and the other is for team planning. Teachers should feel like their individual planning period is protected and available to them daily. Likewise, teachers should also know they have daily team planning responsibilities and must take an active role in fulfilling them each day.

Hold Each Other Accountable. Ensuring each member of the team contributes to the team's success is a critical element of effective team dynamics. Establishing team norms for interaction and assigning specific roles (e.g., chair, minute-keeper, time

manager) helps the team function smoothly and minimizes challenges and time off task. Some typical team norms include respecting each other's time and contributions, actively participating in meetings, valuing and respecting all voices, being on time, and fulfilling your obligations to the team. Taking time at the start of the year to create these norms as a team is an important step toward success. In addition, it may be necessary to revisit team norms on a consistent basis to ensure the team is functioning effectively and following the norms that were established. Also, selecting and rotating team roles consistently can be a

valuable way to share responsibility and foster leadership development among all team members.

Make Sure Each Meeting Has a Clear Agenda. Each team meeting must have a

clear agenda (see Figure 2). It is essential for the team chair to create and share the agenda with all team members before the meeting to help the team stay on task and accomplish team goals.

Figure 2 Sample Agenda
7th Grade Team – Wizards
May 8, 2026 – Agenda

1. Review Team Norms
2. Approve Minutes from Previous Meeting – May 6, 2026
3. Shout-outs and Celebrations – Good News from Team
4. Upcoming Schedule for State Testing – Impact to Daily Class Schedule
5. Student Issues and Needs
 - a. Academic
 - b. Behavioral
 - c. Parent Contacts Needed
6. Fun Friday Reward Plan (Ice Cream Social)
 - a. Items Needed
 - b. Parent Volunteers
 - c. Student List of Participants
 - d. Action Items – Who is Doing What?
7. Agenda Items for Next Meeting

In setting the agenda, consider the amount of time available and be realistic in what can be accomplished in a single meeting. The team chair should also seek input from the administration and other team members when setting the agenda. While the most pressing issues should be placed early on the agenda, it also takes a few minutes to recognize and celebrate the team's accomplishments. Meeting minutes should be kept and made available to all team members and submitted to administration monthly. Administrators should consistently review minutes to stay up to date on what teams are accomplishing and occasionally

attend team meetings to offer support and guidance as needed.

Potential Schedule

The effective use of teaming relies on the schedule that is implemented in the school. Generally, middle grade schools operate on a 6-period class schedule—students taking four core courses and two encore courses each day. When students attend their encore courses, this is typically planning time for teachers. Though it is often set up as one block of planning time for teachers, it is important to operate under the assumption that there are two planning periods built into

this time. For example, in Figure 1, seventh grade students have their two encore courses from 1:05 pm-3:00 pm each day. The first one runs from 1:05 pm-2:00 pm. This should be considered a teacher's first planning period and should focus on team planning responsibilities. The second encore class runs from 2:05 pm-3:00 pm. This should be considered the teacher's second planning period and should focus on individual planning responsibilities. Creating a schedule that fosters and protects this planning structure is paramount to success.

Implementing a schedule that allows for the different team structures to meet each week is also very important to consider. For example, if it is more pressing for teachers to discuss student and curriculum issues on a frequent basis through interdisciplinary teaming, then following a schedule that allows interdisciplinary teams to meet three times a week and grade level teams and professional learning communities meet once a week might be most effective (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 *Sample Weekly Teaming Schedule*

- Monday: Interdisciplinary Team
- Tuesday: Professional Learning Community
- Wednesday: Interdisciplinary Team
- Thursday: Grade Level Teams
- Friday: Interdisciplinary Team

While establishing this type of schedule is essential to success, it is not a “one size fits all” model. Not all schools are alike, and different logistical and scheduling challenges can impact the use of teaming. As such, it is essential that schools work to identify a schedule and format that works for them. If a daily teaming model is not possible, even starting small and providing a single day per week for teams to meet can be a valuable first step for addressing the needs of the school community.

Potential Topics to Address in Teaming

Teaming provides the foundation to address numerous topics and school-related business on a daily basis. Topics typically addressed in teaming include student behavior, curriculum and instructional decisions, student performance and data analysis, parent conferences and communication, school policies, and planning of special events and projects. Using one of the three different team approaches—interdisciplinary teams, grade level teams, and professional learning communities-- should provide the format for success. While some topics relate to all three teaming structures, Figure 4 highlights which team structure most closely relates (See Figure 4).

Figure 4 *Topics and Activities for Teams*

For example, issues of parent conferences and communication would primarily take place through interdisciplinary teams. Whereas examining issues of student performance could occur in all three teaming structures: Interdisciplinary teams, professional learning communities, or grade-level teams, to see trends and patterns that are occurring in individual students, in specific content areas, or across grade levels. Professional learning communities might not be as effective with this task because participants might not be on the same interdisciplinary team and serve the same students. Data analysis might be done by interdisciplinary teams, grade level teams, or professional learning communities. Ultimately, it is up to the school and teams to decide what will work best for them.

Challenges to Teaming

While teaming is an integral component of effective middle grade schools, multiple challenges can interfere with success. The greatest challenge to teaming is typically ensuring a daily schedule that provides a routine structure and consistent use of planning to address the needs of the different types of team organizations. Inefficient use of time during team meetings and team dynamic conflicts can also create issues. With only a limited amount of time available each day, it becomes critical to manage this time effectively and ensure it is used to address relevant issues. Spending too much time socializing and focusing on issues that are not pressing or relevant diverts attention from issues that matter. Furthermore, it is essential that team members learn to collaborate, compromise, and respect one another. Personality conflicts and team dysfunction can easily

impact team dynamics and lead to inefficiency and uncomfortable working environments. Knowing that teaming is an integral component of middle grades teaching and that there is a personal responsibility to work with others, respect opinions and ideas, and compromise is important for teachers to understand.

Closing Thoughts

The power and potential of teaming lies in what educators can accomplish together that they cannot accomplish individually. As individuals, we all bring different talents and skills to the table. When we combine these talents with the gifts of others, the potential is unlimited. Working together to support students and colleagues; sharing individual talents and knowledge to solve problems and dream of possibilities; listening, brainstorming, and reflecting to grow and learn from experiences; offering wisdom and motivation when things are challenging—these are what make teaming special and provide a solid foundation to foster meaningful educational opportunities for all young adolescents, and in the end, allow us to do great things!

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