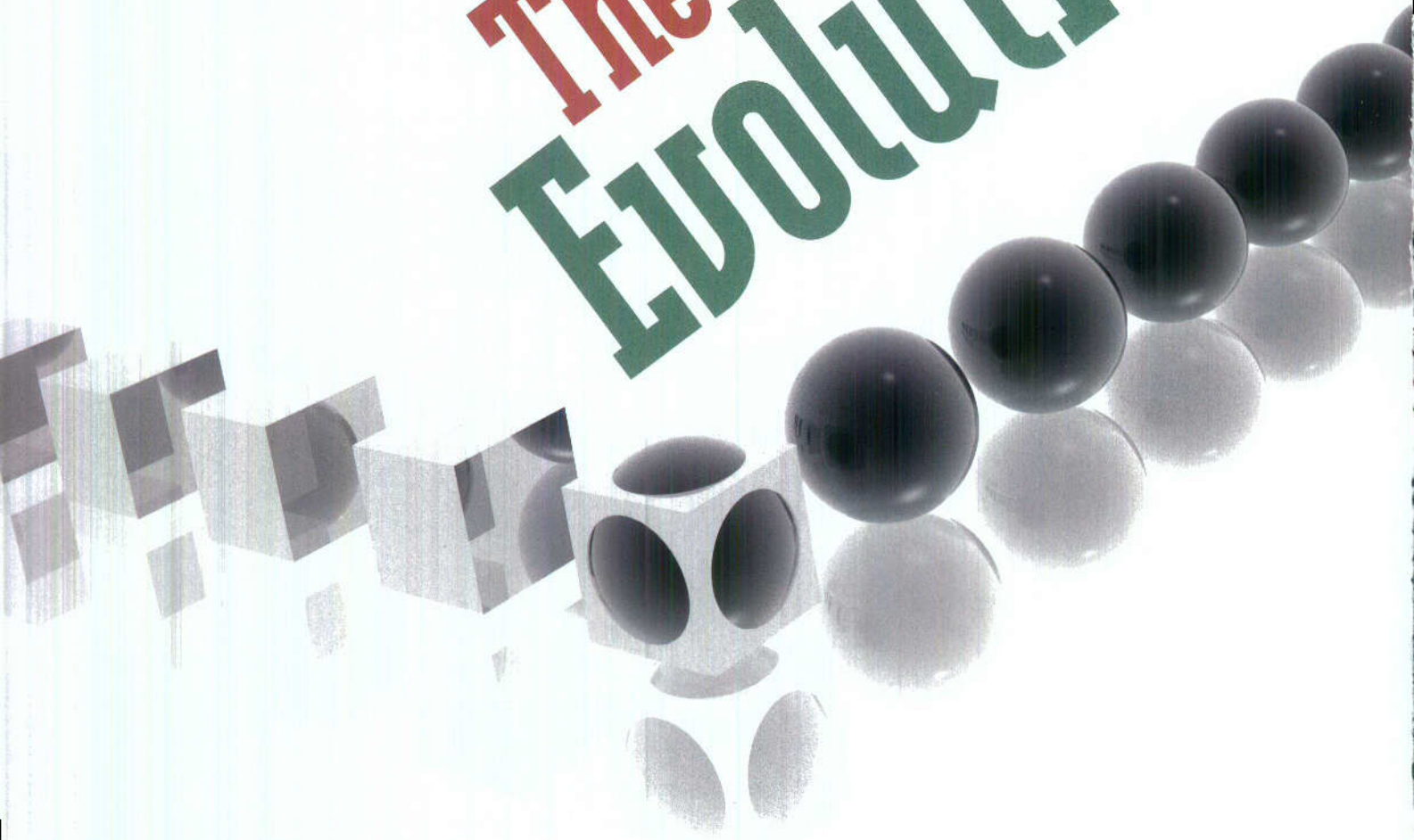


The Academic Evolution of



TEAMING

By Spencer D. Hansen

Teams are vital to successful middle schools but must focus on academics as well as student issues to support middle level excellence.

Principals must be involved to help team members learn to trust one another and ensure that instruction and assessment are a primary focus of team discussions.

Establishing guidelines for thematic units is one way to encourage more-rigorous assignments and deeper learning.

Developing interdisciplinary teams that function properly should be the goal of every school leader who is interested in promoting middle level reform. To accomplish that goal, individual team members should not be left on their own to sink or swim with the teaming concept, but must be guided through a transformational process that teaches them to work as a team. Frequently, teams left to their own devices stagnate and focus on issues that are only indirectly related to student learning. It takes strong leadership to build the kind of interdisciplinary teams that can improve student achievement—and it doesn't happen overnight.

Interdisciplinary teaming is an important part of school improvement, but it must be implemented correctly, and the often-neglected academic aspect of teaming that encompasses instruction, assessment, and student learning must be incorporated. Doing so quiets the critics who charge that interdisciplinary teaming and the middle level philosophy focus too heavily on social and emotional issues instead of a strong academic program (Bradley & Manzo, 2000).

Effective teaming requires commitment, vision, and patience from the school leader. Teachers who are new to the teaming concept go through evolu-

tionary stages as they learn their roles and refine their approach to teaming. Frequently, they encounter facets of teaming that take them out of their comfort zone and require them to hold themselves accountable for individual student learning and to question their own effectiveness. Without strong leadership to guide their progress, they may never contribute to a successful team.

Fulfilling the Potential

Creating and sustaining an interdisciplinary team that is capable of meeting the academic challenges of schools is one of the most satisfying experiences a school leader can have. To help interdisciplinary teams reach their potential, I have found several concepts and strategies that help foster the type of teaming that will improve student achievement and support the type of schools that all school leaders want to lead.

Lay the Groundwork

When teachers are approached about teaming, they are typically willing to participate and see the benefits, but they need a strong multiyear commitment to learn to use interdisciplinary teaming effectively. A good place to start laying this groundwork is by creating a schedule that will allow for

daily common team preparatory time and common students. Once this task is accomplished, designate time for a daily or weekly team meeting during common teacher preparatory time. Early on in the teaming process, you'll start to hear exciting changes in teachers' dialogue about students as they refer to students as "our kids" or "the way we do things." To foster this development, encourage teachers to develop a team name and mascot, activities, field trips, and discipline strategies just for their team. Reinforce the concept by giving teachers the flexibility to think big and help them make their ideas a reality.

Demonstrate What Matters

For interdisciplinary teams to work, school leaders must be intimately involved. Although your life as a school leader is hectic and stressful, your priorities will be judged on the basis of where you spend your time. You must be a consistent member of a team for it to grow and develop into a fully functional entity that treats academic and student issues equally. In most cases, lack of direct support will cause a team to stagnate and eventually stop meeting to collaborate. One way to track the progress of a team is by the types of discussions that take place. This will be impossible to accomplish if you are not there.

Groom Future Leaders

One of the fundamental problems for principals who attend team meetings is that team members naturally look to the school leader to lead the meeting. It is important to take time in the developmental stages to identify a team leader who is responsible

for running the team. This will accomplish two things: it will prevent teachers from thinking of teaming as a top-down initiative and it will make collaboration more effective. Team leaders have readily identifiable characteristics. They tend to be progressive, ambitious, and comfortable advocating for others. Once you identify someone, formally or informally, take that person into your confidence. Share your vision for the development of the team and solicit their advice on how best to proceed. Talk frequently, share information, and foster leadership skills in the team leader to help him or her lead more effectively. Investing in your team leader will give you the ability to take a back seat and phase out your support when the team is ready.

Stay Focused

The next time you go to a team meeting, conduct an experiment: during the meeting, track how much time is spent on student issues (e.g., discipline, special education, family conversations, group reward activities, and field trips) and how much time is spent on academic issues (e.g., interdisciplinary instruction, assessment, student achievement scores, measurable academic goals, and state standards). Do not attempt to influence the discussion, but rather just allow teachers to collaborate. If at least half of the time is spent on academic discussions without any intervention, your team is functioning well. If not, you have some work to do.

A central role of the school administrator in the teaming process is to facilitate discussion. Team discussions have a natural tendency to stay within the comfort zone and focus on student issues. Although those are

important, they frequently take up time that should be used for academic discourse, which is one of the reasons the critics of teaming state that it does not work as intended. Make it a goal to facilitate a balance between academic and student issues. One way to accomplish this is to insist that academic issues be placed first on the team agenda, not student issues. Also be aware of trust issues within the team and members' readiness to engage in academic discourse during team meetings. The nature of what is discussed academically in team meeting must evolve over time, and teachers may need to learn how to trust one another.

Encourage Academic Discussion

Take incremental steps toward more academic focus. Initially, simply establish the precedent that some time in team meetings is reserved for academic discussion. A nonthreatening way to do this is to organize team time around state and local core standards. Ask open-ended, clarifying questions to help the team understand what each member of the team is trying to accomplish alone. Frequently, this simple discussion breeds interest and subsequent collaboration. It also allows teachers to build connections between what is happening in their own classrooms and what is happening in their team members' classrooms.

Once your team is comfortable discussing content-area standards, it is time to move on to thematic, interdisciplinary planning, one of the fundamental reasons for having teaming. When your team arrives at this stage, the background work of discussing standards becomes relevant. Critics of interdisciplinary teaming suggest that attempts to create crosscurricular

connections do not go deep enough and provide only superficial coverage of the curriculum (Bradley & Manzo, 2000). School leaders should heed this concern by not welcoming just any attempt at an interdisciplinary unit. Instead, help guide your team through a refinement process to look critically at what the unit will or will not measure.

First, give your team the task of creating an interdisciplinary planner. Ensure that all team teachers are able to provide feedback when developing the planner and use the process to build commitment to its effectiveness. Set a goal for the number of interdisciplinary units that a team of teachers will complete in a school year. Ensure that you are available and in the classroom when the unit takes place. Be involved in the lessons like one of the students. After the unit is over, use your time with the team to ask reflecting questions to facilitate improvement of the unit.

By this point, teachers on your team should be comfortable discussing academic concerns as a team and share ideas and information freely. Next, it is important to find a cumulative assessment concept that can be used to facilitate discussions about student learning. Student-led conferences and students' accompanying portfolios are excellent choices. The key to using portfolios is to build a rotation into your team meetings so that each teacher brings a collection of portfolios to discuss. Invite other teachers on the team to critique student work and collectively learn from what students have or have not done. Use this information to ask guiding questions about academic effectiveness, competency, and equity. It is also important to blend in state

criterion- and norm-referenced tests. A comprehensive approach to assessment within the teaming structure will yield student achievement gains over time. Increasingly, you will see closer alignment among preparation, interdisciplinary instruction, assessment, and student learning, which will be reflected in student test scores.

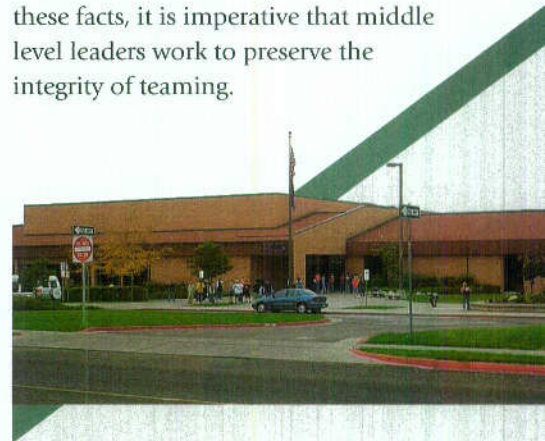
Pull Back

As your team becomes fully functional, the time will come for your direct support for the team to fade. Many school leaders struggle with how to accomplish this effectively. If you pull back permanently, you may see team members slide back into old habits or settle into their comfort zones, especially if the team does not have a strong team leader. If that happens, it is important to reassert yourself and get the team back on track. Reducing your participation is best accomplished by working out a random schedule for visiting team meetings. By dropping in on a team meeting, you can quickly take a reading on the dialogue and interaction of the team members and determine how well the team is currently functioning. Touch base with the team leader often but informally. Use that person as your liaison to communicate vision, direction, and concerns to the team. Also allow veteran teams to mentor new ones within your school. This will reinforce that the teaming concept is a whole school initiative not a top-down administrative mandate.

Conclusion

Interdisciplinary teaming is at the heart of the middle level reform movement. In 2000, roughly 80% of middle level leaders reported that they had some form of teaming happening

in their buildings (Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, & Petzko, 2002). Schools with interdisciplinary teaming are more prone to have stable relationships with teachers and peers (Jackson & Davis, 2000), fewer discipline problems and dropouts (George & Lounsbury, 2000), and more positive learning environments (Erb, 1997). Teachers experience greater parental involvement, improved work climate, and increased job satisfaction (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999). Given these facts, it is imperative that middle level leaders work to preserve the integrity of teaming.



Syracuse Junior High School

Location: Syracuse, UT

Grades: 7–9

Enrollment: 1,581

Community: Suburban

Demographics: 87% White, 6.8% Hispanic, 2.2% Asian, 4.0 % other; 19.4% free and reduced-price lunch.

Administrative team: 1 principal, 2 assistant principals, 1 administrative intern

Faculty: 70 certified teachers

At Syracuse (UT) Junior High School, we have noticed several natural positive outcomes from teaming. Students not only feel connected with their team teachers but also see them as a resource for academic struggles outside of the team teachers' subject areas. Further, students often mention the team's interdisciplinary units and exploratory field trips as their favorite units of instruction for the school year. Parents see the benefit of interconnected instruction and realize that multiple exposure to content increases their student's information retention. As a school community, we are better able to have frank discussions about academic concepts and set goals for student achievement, which has enabled us to help more students meet academic benchmarks as required by state and federal policy-

makers. We are not perfect, but we are striving to be better and our teams are a reflection of that struggle. Students deserve a safe, nurturing, and connected environment as well as efficient instruction, assessment, and learning through a teaming approach. Let's make it happen. **PL**

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