

Classroom Connections (Teaming)

Volume 3, Number 4, April 2001



THE ART OF TEAMING

One of the most important philosophies behind middle level education is teaming. For most middle level educators, collaborating with peers is a rewarding experience that increases their individual morale and enlightens their teaching experience. Working on a team allows educators to brainstorm new ideas, seek feedback from colleagues, and look for solutions to common issues. Teaming also is the best way to connect with students. We know that students who are placed on caring and academically challenging teams experience greater success.

Yet, teaming also can be a struggle and a challenge. First-year teachers and seasoned veterans alike find that it takes tremendous tenacity. Every day, middle level teaching teams tackle issues such as attendance, assessments, paperwork, parent communications, student rewards, schedules, field trips, discipline issues, and curriculum changes. And they are supposed to do this in the brief time designated for team planning. We have designed this edition of *Classroom Connections* to provide some helpful hints about effective teaming.

ADVICE ABOUT TEAMING

Teams need to talk—This is rule number one. The following tips are necessary, but begin with this critical rule: Meet as often and as regularly as possible.

There's more to teaming than a name—Creating a team name helps develop a sense of unity and identity for teachers and students. Perhaps more critical to a team's eventual success, however, is setting the right climate. Providing an atmosphere that allows for risks and failures should be a key component of every team's plan. Work together to establish rules and expectations. Consider that adolescents may have as many as seven different teachers, each with a different set of expectations. Navigating that road to success would be difficult for anyone. Simplify the rules. Let your team demonstrate the importance of consistency.

Team longevity—The longer teams stay together, the more likely it is that they will be able to make successful changes. Ideally, that means a team will be together for several years. This time helps members learn to work well together. To keep things fresh, sit down together at the beginning of each year to establish new team goals. Look for new teaching strategies, new lessons, innovative interdisciplinary units, or new methods for sharing curriculum. As team members learn to trust each other, they learn to try new ideas.

Never grade papers during a team meeting—Some educators might consider this an insult to their intelligence, but it happens and it's harmful. Team time should be sacred. We all have too much to do and tasks often accumulate and seem unmanageable. The good news is that you are part of a team, so the best way to handle these challenges is to approach them as a team. Divide and conquer. Look for good ways to share the workload. Removing yourself from a team meeting to grade papers is not one of them.





Keep a journal of parent contacts—One of the most frustrating aspects of calling parents is hearing them tell you that no teacher has ever called them concerning their children. This may or may not be true, but it presents you with a real challenge: You have to establish a level of communication and trust with a skeptical parent. Start by keeping a written record of all parent communications. It helps to have written support when dealing with tough issues. Include examples of intervention strategies that your team has used. Consider keeping a similar communications log for all contacts with students.

Set the agenda—Although this task might seem like more paperwork, it's important. Have you ever sat in a meeting and after 45 minutes realized that your time was wasted? This is largely due to distractions and poor planning, and it frustrates everyone involved. Focused, clear agendas usually result in successful meetings.

A sample agenda is part of this edition of *Classroom Connections*. If you prefer to create your own agenda, consider using these four concepts:

1. **Brevity is best**—An agenda should never be too lengthy.
2. **Keep it focused on student success**—Talk about all of your students, not only the disruptive ones. Share student work samples, explore ways to reward the positive, discuss individual students' progress, and periodically invite students to your team meetings.
3. **Talk about curriculum**—At the beginning of the week, each team member should share what he or she plans to cover during the next five days. Discuss future tests, assignments, and projects. This is a great opportunity for team members to learn new ways to teach concepts. For example, if you know that the science teacher is exploring the solar system next month and in language arts you plan to launch into a unit on science fiction literature, join forces and teach them together. If you never discuss your curriculum, you *and your students* will miss the natural connections that exist between different subjects.
4. **Follow up**—Educators are so creative! We think of great ideas. The problem is we sometimes forget who is supposed to do what. Sound familiar? Here's a way to avoid this pattern: At the end of a team meeting of thinking, creating, and brain-storming, assign specific tasks and due dates to each team member.



SAMPLE TEAM AGENDA

Team name: _____ Date: _____

Team issues to discuss: _____

School-wide issues to discuss: _____

Student issues: _____ Parent contacts: _____

Curriculum update: _____

_____ Language Arts _____ Social Studies _____ Math _____ Science

_____ Music _____ Physical Education _____ Art _____ Electives

Great idea ... let's try this ... (Brainstorming reminder list)

Things to do: _____

Who will do what?: _____

Date to be completed: _____

LIFESAVERS!

Advice from middle level practitioners about making team meetings run smoothly.

- Eating makes a meeting. Bring in snacks to help keep things lighthearted. Celebrate team members' birthdays and other important events.
- Everyone has to have a task. Assign jobs. Share the workload. One person should never do all of the work. Talk to those team members who never step up to help.
- Great teams take time to build relationships. Team-building activities help. Participate in some "getting-to-know-you" exercises at the beginning of the year. Continue and expand them throughout the next nine months.
- Team leaders should meet in the summer with the principal. Together they can brainstorm ideas and strategies on how to build a team. Remember, building teams takes training.
- A good team leader is key. The team leader is not a supervisor; he or she just helps facilitate the meeting. **Great teams have great team leaders.**

Classroom Connections (Teaming) *(continued)*



- Contact all parents within the first few weeks of school. Begin on a positive note to pave the way for a solid relationship.
- Regular team meetings with the building administration can open school-wide lines of communication and prevent competition among teams.
- Have a plan and stay organized. Make time to laugh - team meetings can be fun!
- Spending time together outside of school helps, too. Go to dinner or a movie after school. Seeing a teammate in a social setting sometimes helps improve communication.
- Stay focused on students! Invite them to team meetings. Review their work. Look for ways to celebrate their successes. Use a team meeting to help them deal with behavioral issues. Establish team expectations for students and set goals with them. Discuss rewards and consequences with them.

Original publication information:

Classroom Connections, April 2001, Vol. 3, No. 4.

Classroom Connections (Teaming)

Volume 4, Number 4, April 2002



THE TASK OF TEAMING

Last spring we published an issue of *Classroom Connections* that talked about the "Art of Teaming." As educators, we all understand that team development is an evolutionary process, so in this issue we purposely talk about it again, specifically what happens when teachers take teaming from idea to implementation. The days of forming teams are practically over. Nearly every educator in schools today has been through that process. The question that remains is: How do we encourage participation, deal with negative attitudes, and make team time productive? We describe below some common traps teams experience and offer ideas for turning things around. But, when you really feel defeated, remember that teaming doesn't happen overnight. It takes time and tenacity.

THE STUMBLING BLOCKS OF TEAMING

- Some teams do not spend time dealing with real issues and real solutions.
- Team time, at times, equals a waste of time.
- Not all members of a team share the workload and responsibility.
- Some team members look for opportunities to cancel team meetings instead of staying on schedule.
- Grading papers during team time is considered acceptable. After all, when else can you do it?
- Too much time is spent on trivial details.
- There is no structure for team meetings.

TACTICS TO KEEP YOUR TEAM ON TRACK

- Consider team time as a sacred time - it's not for grading papers.
- Insist that team meetings are never canceled or postponed—only if there is a critical reason for doing so.
- Create an agenda that focuses on three main topics—students, curriculum, and tasks you need to complete.
- Rotate the responsibility of being the team leader at least annually. Some teams rotate their leader every semester. This allows for everyone to share the load and learn team organization and management.
- Assign tasks to each team member and give due dates for all tasks. This allows the leader to hold all team members accountable.
- Talk about curriculum issues in every team meeting. Go beyond sharing what you are teaching. Bring in examples of what you are planning to do with your students. Teach a lesson to your team. This is a great way to evaluate and get feedback to help you improve your lesson plans. You and your team have a common goal, so their advice is some of the best you'll get.
- Bring samples of student work to each team meeting. Share strategies you used to motivate students. Describe the topic and tasks required. Talk about whether students worked individually or in groups. Did they have a choice? Mention the work process—where the students sat in the classroom and how much time it took to complete the assignment. You can gather great information on how to help students succeed by sharing and discussing the instructional process in your classroom. Just think of how much more productive your meetings would be if you focused on the important issues like student success.



- Deal with classroom discipline issues as a team. Share strategies you have used that have successfully curbed bad behavior. For example, you might have spent one-on-one time with a misbehaving student to describe directions for an assignment. This technique might have helped the student comprehend what she needed to accomplish. Or maybe you changed your seating format and project pairings to deal with disruption issues.

TAKING YOUR TEAM'S TEMPERATURE: EVALUATING PROGRESS AND BUILDING COHESIVENESS

Suggest surveys as a way to share thoughts with your team members. Use the sample survey below or adjust it to suit your team. Another great method of gathering information about each other is to take some wacky surveys that do not relate to school-wide issues. For example, several magazines are famous for their quirky surveys. They may ask personal questions, but they are worth a good laugh and can help build bonds among your team members.

TURNING THE LENS ON YOUR TEAM

Have everyone on your team take this quick survey, then collect the answers and share them with the group. You can pick more than one answer.

1. What strengths do you bring to your team?
 - a. I am always prepared for team meetings.
 - b. I share my opinion even when not asked.
 - c. I have been or am currently the team leader.
 - d. I volunteer to complete necessary team tasks.
 - e. I show up for team meetings with a forced smile.
2. Describe your team.
 - a. We meet everyday—no exceptions.
 - b. We only meet when food is provided.
 - c. We never meet for more than 20 minutes a day.
 - d. Team time is enjoyable.
 - e. Members of the team look for ways not to attend the meeting.
3. Fill in the blank. My teammates make me _____
 - a. want to come to meetings.
 - b. want to call in sick.
 - c. try to do a better job.
 - d. want to work harder.
 - e. frustrated.
4. What new strategies has your team tried in the last school year?
5. What frustrates you about your team meetings?
6. What three new ideas or strategies should your team try next year?



7. What three things can you do to make your team move in a better direction?
8. If you could create an agenda for your team what items would you include?
9. If you could tell your teammates three things what would they be?
10. Do you think teaming is critical to the success of your students? Why?

Which of the following strategies has your team used in the last two weeks? (Check your answers.)

- Brought food to a meeting
- Stayed on task for the entire meeting
- Used an agenda
- Looked at student work
- Contacted parents
- Evaluated a team member's lesson
- Changed the meeting schedule
- Invited a student to discuss an issue during our team time
- Used consensus to solve an issue
- Assigned tasks to other team members
- Dealt with a team conflict
- Provided support to a team member
- Planned a unit or discussed curriculum

FINAL THOUGHTS

As you can see, there are many things teams need to do. Our best advice is to start dealing with what is important and what will really make a difference for your students. Teaming is designed to increase academic achievement and allows educators to solve problems together—so, maximize your time. Don't waste team meetings on trivial issues that frustrate you and your teammates. Solve problems, seek advice, mentor each other, talk to students, organize curriculum, and most of all, celebrate with each other!

Original publication information:

Classroom Connections, April 2002, Vol. 4, No. 4.