

Impactful Multi-Grade Level Collaboration: How Does Multi-Grade Level Collaboration, During the School Day, Help Staff Understand and Address Curriculum Gaps Between Grade Levels?

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Background That Led to Your Team's Inquiry:

During our first round of data collection from the Marzano Research studies, we found that as a building we had a great desire to have meaningful conversations through collaboration. The data indicated lower marks for 'teachers having an opportunity to observe and discuss effective teaching,' and 'teachers are provided support to enhance their pedagogical skills through reflections and professional growth plans.' We know that "capitalizing on the collective expertise of others in a collaborative culture helps to improve teacher efficacy and confidence. When teachers know there is an embedded system of teacher support available on a consistent basis, it increases the prospect of accessing answers that result in breakthroughs much more than teaching in isolation" (Williams Hierck 2015).

Our wondering came from the desire to allow the time and opportunity for staff members to collaborate, during the school day. We held the belief that we could create a more positive climate, and directly impact the instruction, by providing time for meaningful curricular discussions. By being intentional with our schedule, we hoped to provide time for critical and insightful discussion among our grade levels. We believed this time could address curriculum gaps and allow for a greater understanding of curriculum, standards, discipline, and expectations at different grade levels. Therefore, the purpose of our action research was to strategically impact our building climate through collaboration.

Statement of Your Team's Wondering:

With this purpose we wondered how does collaboration, during the school day, help staff understand and address curriculum gaps between grade levels?

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into our wondering, we created an altered schedule that was applied once a week for six weeks. On the days in which the schedule was altered, teachers were able to meet with grade-level teachers outside of their regular collaboration/preparations time. Our normal schedule operates with the same grade level having a preparatory time. With our alterations to the schedule, we created a time for each grade level to meet with the grade level above and below them. We provided a framework for the discussion time, where the focus was on curriculum, discipline, expectations, and concerns. Pre and post interviews were conducted with staff members on their perceptions of our collaborative climate.

Stating Your Team's Learning and Supporting it with Data:

As a result of analyzing our data, two important things we learned include:

- Learning statement One: As teachers had time built-in to their day to collaboration, with a provided discussion framework, we began to see a direct impact on vertical articulation, within the building.
- Learning Statement Two: The building climate, regarding collaboration, was viewed much more positively, when collaboration time was built into the school day.

As teachers had time built-in to their day for collaboration, with a provided framework, we began to see a direct impact on vertical articulation, within the building. Through pre and post interviews, as well as my own personal observations of teachers, we began to see changes in classrooms, as a result of this collaboration time. For example, our teachers in kindergarten and first grade were able to identify a curriculum gap in their math standards. Where our kindergarten teachers end in their math series is not where our first grade teachers begin the year, in their math series. This epiphany explains a great deal about our beginning of the year assessment data, as well as the frustration from the students in the math curriculum. Without this collaboration time, we would not have had one of the most critical discussions needed, about our curriculum. Another example, about the impact on instruction that this collaboration had is related to vertical articulation; however it is more about the expectations at each grade level and its direct impact on the curriculum. During one particular meeting, it became clear that grade two and grade three had very different expectations for morning routines. Through this collaboration time, grade two decided to have their students begin practicing more independence toward the end of the school year. This will allow for greater success of our students, as they move from one grade level to the other. Without providing the time and the framework for these multi-grade level meetings, our teachers would not have known about their differing expectations. These small changes allow our students to be more successful and our teachers to be less frustrated about procedures, at the beginning of the year; overall, creating a more positive atmosphere.

The building climate, regarding collaboration, was viewed much more positively, when collaboration time was built into the school day. Our teachers' perception of effective and valuable collaboration was quite low before beginning this action research project. The teachers felt positively about their own personal grade level collaboration, but as a building, we were not collaborating. Teachers across grade levels did not know how each teacher was teaching. Through this project, our teachers' attitudes became more positive. For example, one teacher noted, "I would love to be able to do it more throughout the year! The meetings were very helpful!" Another teacher's post interview comments were, "I enjoyed talking to the grade levels above and below my grade level to find out what concerns they have. It was great to share ideas on how to address certain areas and to see what areas they feel need more focus or less throughout the year." Other comments collected were:

- "Very informational"
- "Gave grade levels insight on testing and homework"
- "Learned additional parent communication strategies"
- "Discussed discipline strategies and was able to compare and contrast teaching styles"

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Providing Concluding Thoughts:

During this action research cycle, we learned a lot about how we collaborate. “In order to ensure all students learn, educators must work collaboratively rather than in isolation and take collective responsibility for student learning. The collaborative team must replace the isolated classroom as the fundamental structure of the school” (Williams Hierck 2015).

Through this we found that we could create a more positive climate, and directly impact the instruction, by providing time for meaningful curricular discussions. By being intentional with our schedule, we provided time for critical and insightful discussion among our grade levels. We were able to address curriculum gaps and allow for a greater understanding of curriculum, standards, discipline, and expectations at different grade levels. Through this action research we strategically impacted our building climate through collaboration.

Moving forward, we will continue to provide multi-grade level collaboration time, during the course of the day. We will look to provide these six week cycles, over the course of the year. Currently, our team is building out times, when these six weeks’ worth of collaboration times will be the most impactful for teachers.

This project may to continue to create additional wonderings like: How can we get all the teachers, at every grade level together for multi-grade level collaboration, instead of only a portion of them? What additional types of conversation can be created through our framework, to continue to increase our vertical articulation? Can these collaboration times be utilized to create an updated, more accurate curriculum map?

Through every action research cycle we will complete in the future, we will continue to learn, refine, and improve our practices. This process helps us become better educators. As a building, we are becoming more collaborative and increasing our capacity to be a positive building climate.

References:

Williams, Kenneth & Hierck, Tom (2015). Starting a Movement: Building culture from the inside out in Professional Learning Communities. Bloomington: Solution tree Press.