

How to Build Strong, Collaborative Teacher Teams

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Background That Led to Your Inquiry:

Southwick Elementary School has large grade level teams (8 to 9 teachers per team) with many inexperienced teachers. Last year, I noticed that collaboration meetings were lengthy and teachers left frustrated without accomplishing much. Therefore, the purpose of my action research was to see if I split large teams into triads if this will decrease the level of teacher frustration and increase the productiveness within collaboration and planning meetings.

Statement of Your Wondering:

With this purpose, I wondered in what ways can I, as principal, best develop a collaborative culture characterized by teachers collaborating and sharing ideas for lesson planning and instruction. In addition, what kind of supports will be needed from me in order to help implement effective collaboration and lesson planning and how does the relationship between teachers on large teams affect collaboration and lesson planning?

Methods/Procedures:

To gain insights into my wonderings, I worked with my School Improvement Team to develop meeting norms and discuss procedures that we can put in place to increase the level of productivity. I then took the following steps: Designated Wednesdays for school-wide team planning and collaboration.

Assigned a grade level coach to each grade level and 2 grade level team block support teachers for each grade level. Worked with instructional coaches to develop agendas and collaboration logs to ensure that everyone is knowledgeable about what is going on. Assigned roles for each meeting to increase teacher participation and effectiveness. Split teams into triads to allow more effective collaboration and sharing of ideas while assigning each teacher triad a subject area of focus. Rotated teacher triads after each bundle of standards (4-5 weeks). Embedded professional development and district expectations into planning and collaboration teams.

In addition, I analyzed teacher strengths, experience, and understanding of curriculum in order to ensure that we would have triads that are balanced in skill sets. I then set aside dates and times for teachers to be able to collaborate about instructional best practices and planning. I assigned 3 grade level instructional coaches and met weekly with them to work to develop agendas and collaboration logs to ensure that everyone is knowledgeable about what is going on and that we were all moving forward as a school. I then split teams of 9 into triads to allow more effective collaboration and sharing of ideas while assigning each triad a subject areas of focus. The goal was for teachers to leave with information that they can use to better equip teachers for instruction.

I collected data with collaboration logs, collaboration agendas, anecdotal notes of teacher input, teacher surveys and meeting frequently with the School Improvement Team to reflect on the current practices and make adjustments as needed.

I analyzed the data by first, meeting with my instructional coaches to discuss the previous week and the collaboration logs. Second, we would discuss teacher input and results from surveys and the School Improvement Team. Third, we would tweak practices as needed to help the flow of the meetings and improve the outcome and productivity. Lastly, I would use my classroom observations and teacher effectiveness as a pulse of the impact of planning and collaborating. I collected data for the entire school year as this year will be a guide for determining how we will plan and collaborate for the upcoming school year.

Stating Your Learning and Supporting it with Data:

As a result of analyzing my data, I learned that strategically setting aside dates and times for teachers to collaborate and plan will help improve instructional practices, time management, meeting effectiveness, and shared instructional leadership. In addition, administration meeting frequently with instructional coaches/team leads and placing an instructional coach/team lead on each team will help with to provide an instructional focus for the building.

By setting aside dates and times for teachers to be able to collaborate about instructional best practices and planning, instructional practices improved (evidence-teacher walkthroughs). Having 3 team coaches and 6 team block supports helped in providing a focus and consistency in meetings. Splitting teams of 9 into triads to allow more effective collaboration and sharing of ideas while assigning each triad a subject areas of focus has helped teachers to gain a better understanding of curriculum and standards and exchange innovative ideas for improving instruction. There is evidence of more teacher dialogue during meetings. Changing triads has helped teachers to be well versed in all subject areas. The dynamics of the triad with different team members is an area of opportunity as strengths and weaknesses play a factor on production and quality. Overall we had positive comments and input from teachers. EL teachers are able to plan lessons to reinforce what is being taught in classrooms as lesson focuses are aligned.

Teacher Comments

"I feel that we are able to make more in depth plans as opposed to vague ideas of how we can teach each standard."

"We are able to leave planning/collaboration meetings with lesson plans for all 3 core subjects, but also keeping in mind that they can be tweaked to best meet your class's needs."

Providing Concluding Thoughts:

In conclusion, my action research project suggests that in schools where the principal provides shared instructional leadership, higher rates of teacher collaboration occurs and instructional practices improve. Further, where teachers spend more time collaborating on instruction, teachers will be more prepared and student learning will increase. Finally, I have learned that my role as principal has a direct and significant impact on the productiveness of teacher collaborations and planning.

My findings suggest that one lever for encouraging teacher collaboration and thereby improving student achievement is to help principals provide shared instructional leadership in their schools. Going forward, I would like to continue this process and expand shared instructional leadership within Southwick Elementary School. When principals are deeply involved in the instructional life of the school, my model suggests that they help put in place the kinds of support structures that are necessary for active collaboration among the staff. I believe that my findings provide evidence of important links between shared instructional leadership,

teacher collaboration, and student achievement. Future research should focus on replicating and extending these findings with different populations within the school and provide more student achievement data. Questions to Consider: Now that this action research project has been completed, will I see more teacher productivity? Has this created a culture of teacher-driven collaborations? Will productive teacher collaboration and planning meetings impact student achievement?

References:

N/A