

Assessing Your School's Readiness for Teamed Instruction

Before making the decision to begin using instructional teams, the faculty should take time to explore teamed instruction and its implications for school change. Faculties should assess their readiness and decide collectively whether to “buy in.” They must commit to working collaboratively and determine ways to promote understanding and acceptance of the inevitable changes that are part of the teaming process. This information might be used with a school faculty to help them determine their readiness for teaming.

There are four conditions that support instructional teaming. After reading the description of each, discuss the questions that follow.

Collaborative School Culture

The culture or context of teaching becomes collaborative rather, than isolated. Collaborative methods of working with peers, supervisors, parents, and students—sharing ideas, responsibilities, and decisions—result in balanced perspectives and better choices. Individuals may lose a certain amount of autonomy, but they experience reduced feelings of isolation, and they gain emotional support and intellectual insights from their teammates and others.

In an integrated school, teachers dissolve departmental boundaries and work together in grade-level or multiage interdisciplinary teams. These teams share a common group of students and design curriculum around essential questions, themes, or interdisciplinary concepts and skills.

Here are some questions to ask about your school's culture.

- How would you describe communication and collaboration in your school?
- What boundaries exist between teachers in various disciplines? Between teachers and administrators? Between teachers and students? Between staff and community? How might you begin to dissolve these boundaries?
- What are the benefits to staff, students, and community of dissolving the boundaries and implementing instructional teaming?

Compatible Core Beliefs

Working together, a school community must identify beliefs they share about teaching and learning. Once the core beliefs are identified, the next step is to develop a clear vision of what the school is to become and how teaming can help the school along its journey. From this vision, a mission and goals can evolve.

Most schools have a mission statement posted in the front office. However, often little evidence of implementation of the mission is visible in the instruction and schooling practices.

To what degree are the following core beliefs that support teaming visible in your school?

1. Less is more. An integrated teamed approach provides a curriculum that is coherent and focused on the most important concepts and skills across the disciplines. Such a curriculum emphasizes depth, not breadth, of learning.
2. How we teach is as important as what we teach. Instruction is constructivist, or student centered. Students are involved in determining topics for study. Content knowledge and learning skills comprise equal shares of the curriculum and learning is applied across the curriculum and in the real world.
3. All students can learn. The school has reduced tracking and uses inclusion and other collaborative models of instruction. Standards mastery applies to all groups of students, and teachers use differentiated methods of instruction and culturally responsive teaching practices.

Consider the following questions about core beliefs in your school.

- What percentage of each of these groups achieves mastery of state standards: African American, Latino, White, Low SES, and ELL?
- What core beliefs need to change in order to promote success for all students?
- Which of the core beliefs described above is most widely accepted in your school community?
- Which will present the greatest challenge?

Supports for Change

There are four essential supports for change: (1) readiness for change, (2) nurturing work environment, (3) supportive leadership in the school and district, and (4) continuous learning through professional development.

First, for change to occur, the *staff must be committed to doing things differently*. They must understand that teamed instruction is an effective way to promote student learning. Also, they must be team players who are willing to work collaboratively and commit time to reaching consensus. Most importantly, the staff must believe that teaming is in the best interest of students and is supported by research on teaching and learning.

Change efforts are most successful in a nurturing work environment that is open to improvement, enjoys risk taking, and provides recognition and rewards. Mutual trust and respect between role groups (teachers, administrators, parents, and students) is also necessary for any school improvement to occur.

Teachers consistently identify administrative commitment and support as the most essential condition for successful teaming. Although administrators are primarily responsible for providing facilitating structures such as adequate budget, time, and space, they must also demonstrate their commitment to teaming in other ways. Administrators must see themselves as supporters, facilitators, barrier removers, and resource providers.

Two of the most important resources that administrators can provide are time and money for professional development. Teachers will need training designed to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to teaming and curriculum integration.

These questions can help you decide if supports for teaming are present in your school.

- To what degree are the key supports already present?
- What supports, resources, and behaviors will be needed to begin teaming?
- How can time and fiscal and human resources be used more effectively for professional development?

Facilitating Structures

Teachers in schools that use teaming have identified certain structures that facilitate teamed instruction. They include (1) scheduling for adequate common planning time, (2) blocks of time for instruction, (3) flexible instructional space, and (4) adequate budget for resources and supports.

If interdisciplinary teams are to be successful, they must *have adequate time to learn, to plan, and to evaluate their work*. A school that is serious about teaming must find ways to reallocate time and redefine teachers' work. It is essential that teams have adequate planning time during the school day or week as well as non-instructional time within the school calendar devoted to team building and instructional planning and reflection. Some schools allocate daily team planning time, while others use longer blocks of time for planning during the school week. Also, many successful schools use late start or early release time for students for team planning and professional development.

Block scheduling is another structure that supports teaming. During a block of instructional time, two or more teachers from different disciplines can teach the same group of students. Block scheduling and flexible use of time within the block permit a team to develop a comprehensive integrated curriculum that responds to particular needs and interests of students. Also, block scheduling allows for in-depth study or

extended time in a particular activity (e.g., writing activities, laboratory experiments, service learning, and guest speakers), regrouping or subdividing students for individualized or small group instruction, and working independently or in groups on projects.

When teams of teachers use a block schedule, they have opportunities to use more varied instructional approaches, to control how time is used, and to group students in different ways. To use these strategies effectively, they need *flexible instructional space* that can accommodate large and small groups as well as individualized instruction. Using space effectively first involves ensuring that team teachers' classrooms are in close proximity to each other. Second, for paired teaching, or co-teaching, a divided classroom may be beneficial. Third, teachers may need a large group space that can accommodate the entire team of students. Finally, the team will need a common planning area or work room. By relocating classroom assignments, making minor adjustments in the facility, and using flexibility and creativity with the existing space, administrators and teachers can facilitate more effective teaming.

In addition to changes in use of time, space, and scheduling, staff must consider the *extra costs involved in these changes*, as well as the costs related to professional development. A school should consider the following costs when the budget is prepared. (1) Additional funds may be needed to compensate teachers for time outside the calendar for professional development or for substitute teachers in their classrooms at times during the school year. (2) When two or more teachers work with a common group of students, the overall pupil-teacher ratio may be lower and create additional staffing costs. (3) Professional development and ongoing technical assistance provided by an experienced facilitator or participation in institutes, conferences, and workshops should be budgetary priorities to support implementation of effective interdisciplinary teaming. (4) Some alterations of the school facility as well as new instructional materials may be additional costs a school will need to consider.

How would you answer these questions about your school?

- To what extent do you currently utilize block scheduling for interdisciplinary teaching?
- What are some of the special needs of your students that can best be met by using blocks of time?
- What changes need to be made in the use of instructional space to facilitate teaming?
- How are budgetary priorities determined in your school? What fiscal resources will you need to support teaming? What problems might you anticipate in securing these resources?

Source: Burns, R. (1999). *Dissolving the boundaries: Planning for curriculum integration in middle and secondary schools*. Charleston, WV: AEL (now Edvantia). This book is out of print.