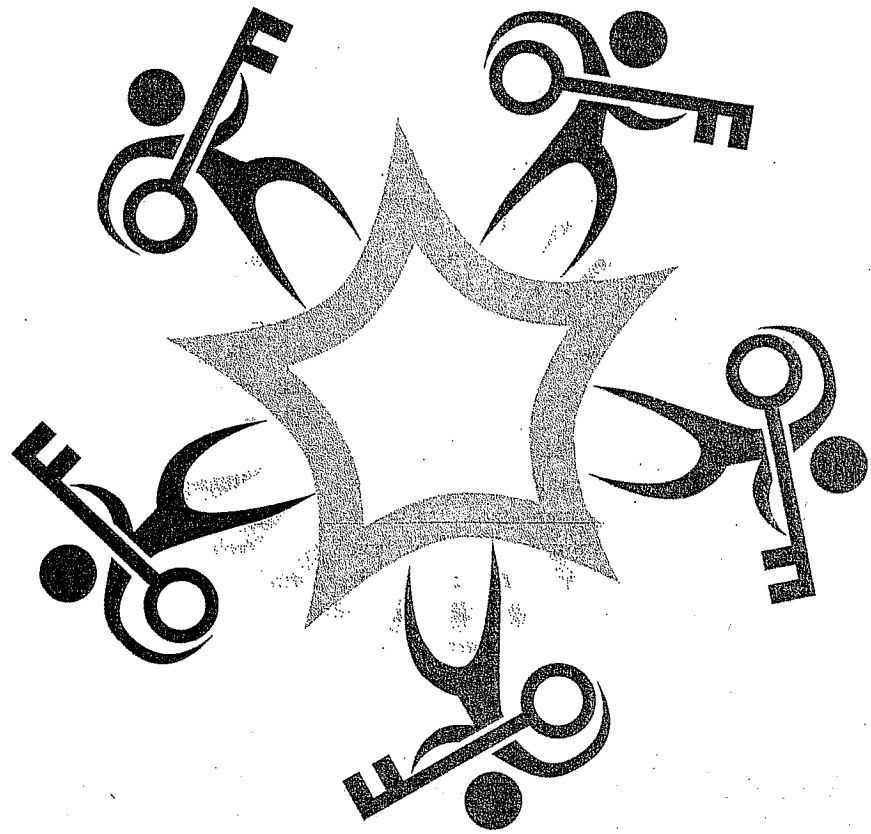
TEAM SPIRIT



Teachers work together to establish and achieve key goals

By Vivian Troen and Katherine C. Boles

Common experience, along with a vast collection of research, demonstrates that schools can expect a range of benefits to accrue when teachers work together. Teacher teaming can reduce teacher isolation, increase collegiality, facilitate the sharing of resources and ideas, and capitalize on teachers' individual and shared strengths. And most recently, teacher teaming has been "discovered" as an avenue toward teacher learning and enhanced professional development that can lead to gains in student achievement.

We've been working in and studying teacher teams for more than two decades, and our current work focuses specifically on analyzing the elements of effective teacher teams. So far, we have found very few teams that can truly be called effective in every sense. The reasons for this are many and vary from school to school. Too often, however, teams are created by a school leader putting groups of teachers together, generally by grade level or subject matter, and saying, "OK, you guys are a team, now collaborate."

Unfortunately, collaboration is not synonymous with effective teaming, and most teams lack the tools and resources needed to make them successful. Our research has uncovered the most common pitfalls to team success.

COMMON TEAMING PITFALLS

- Teachers are given common planning time for team meetings but lack the facilitation skills necessary to use the time effectively.
- Teachers and principals believe that experience equals expertise; teams frequently lack internal expertise and are reluctant to look outside the team for help.
- Teachers are reluctant to exert leadership or assume leadership roles.
- Teachers choose to team around issues that are peripheral rather than central to their daily teaching.
- Good working relationships are seen as the key to team success; the content of teaching and learning has less emphasis.
- The team has no clear purpose or goals; team members may speak of issues such as increased collegiality or mutual support, but rarely engage in instructional talk that would significantly change teaching and learning.
- Putting necessary structures in place is undervalued.
- Most teachers have no vision of what constitutes effective teaming, and they have few models to learn from.

Team tuneup worksheet. See NSDC tool on p. 63.

CONDITIONS OF EFFECTIVE TEACHER TEAMS

Our experience has shown that teaching teams rarely reach their potential because they lack effective team attributes. Anyone who wants to upgrade the performance of teaching teams needs not only

to understand these factors but also how to implement strategies necessary to ensure team success.

We've developed a framework, below, for evaluating the effectiveness of teams, and we look at each team we investigate using five criteria, or conditions. Within each condition are several levels of development that determine where a team's overall effectiveness lies along a broad spectrum.

A TEAMING SUCCESS STORY

We do not consider ourselves ivory-tower academicians far removed from the real life of schools and classrooms. We have each spent more than 20 years as public school teachers and fully understand the problems of transforming theoretical models into everyday practice that yields realistic results. Recently, using the framework we developed, we worked with teams in one K-8 school in a large urban school system to improve student learning.

We will call this school Elmhurst Elementary. Its principal had read a description of what we had been calling our Millennium Team teaching model (Troen & Boles, 2003) and found funds to implement our model in her school for the 2007-08 school year. Her goal was to make this a multiyear initiative to transform the school.

THE MILLENNIUM TEAMS

Understanding the pitfalls to teaming, we developed a series of workshops and study groups for Elmhurst Millennium Team teachers. These were designed to guide teachers in developing and reflecting on their practice as members of a team responsible for improving student learning, enhancing inclusion strategies, initiating new teachers into the profession, and/or developing a peer coaching relationship.

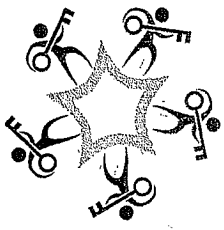
Agreeing that teacher learning cannot take place in 30-minute blocks, the principal arranged the master schedule to give each team an 80-minute block once a week for meeting time. A priority was to teach the teachers how to use that block of time during the school year as an opportunity to build curricular and instructional skills. We introduced the teachers to the importance of focused instructional talk as opposed to endless discussions about operations. Teams practiced using tools for co-planning, co-teaching, and observing and documenting practice in order to promote a culture of shared inquiry and collaboration.

As a result of these encounters, the

CONDITIONS OF EFFECTIVE TEACHER TEAMS

Improved teaching and learning

Task focus	Leadership	Establishing structures and processes	Collaborative climate	Personal accountability
• Is the team's task well-defined and articulated? • Does it focus on improving student learning?	• Does the team encourage leadership by all its members? • Is leadership distributed so that it is available in one way or another, and at one time or another, to all teachers? • Are all teachers empowered to take risks? • Is individual teacher instructional expertise valued and used by team members?	• Does the team determine ways to work together to achieve agreed-upon goals? • Does the team distribute resources effectively to accomplish its goals? • If needed, does the team know how to access and enlist outside expertise?	• Does the team promote a working environment that generates trust, communication, and synergy?	• Is there an expectation of performance improvement for both the team and the individual?



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teachers assumed responsibility for setting their own Millennium Team goals and identifying the outcomes they hoped to achieve collectively. They defined four team goals:

1. Define and explore what constitutes instructional talk.
2. Connect team conversations to classroom planning and practice.
3. Provide opportunities to improve practice in concrete forms (e.g. using assessment data, working collaboratively on lesson plans, looking at student work, and conducting classroom observations) with room for each person's reactions, interpretations, conjectures, and analysis.
4. Develop and enact practices that ensure individual and mutual accountability within the team.

We established a structure so that teachers regularly met in ongoing study groups to raise questions, solve problems, examine student work, co-plan units, develop their teaching practices, and refine the Millennium Team model. Participants collaborated with us in the ongoing development of study group agendas and monthly "team tune-ups," based on their evolving work.

At the team tune-ups, we gave each team member a copy of the meeting transcripts and asked them to find evidence of team talk around the four Millennium Team goals. Over the school year, teams formed definitions and judgments about attaining these goals and identified next steps. Team members agreed to hold each other accountable for attaining their team goals and developed benchmarks to evaluate progress in achieving them.

AN ASSESSMENT OF TEAM PROGRESS

A typical problem with teacher communities where team meetings are supposed to address instructional issues is that the teachers end up having discussions that merely make them feel better. Like people everywhere, teachers like to talk to each other about their jobs. But in the end, there are few tangible outcomes that demonstrate teacher or student improvement. The Millennium Team challenge was to assess whether the process on which everyone had worked so hard was meeting the goals we had set for ourselves.

At the end of the 2007-08 academic year, we collected data to assess the effect of the new team structure on Elmhurst's teacher teams. We collected data for this assessment from several sources: student work and test scores, honor roll and uniform compliance data, discipline behavior records, curriculum maps, lesson plans, meeting minutes and transcripts, and interviews with the principal and teachers. We identified four major ways in which change had occurred in the teams.

1. Defining and exploring what constitutes instructional talk

Teachers had committed to improving their own conversations about curriculum and instruction in order to improve their students' learning. To prevent the common team pitfall of discussions being consumed by logistics, we had introduced a protocol that helped teams analyze a team transcript and pinpoint different kinds of instructional talk. (See p. 63.) Reading transcripts of previous team meetings allowed teachers to analyze what they had actually discussed. As they gained skill in observing their own process, teachers were ably equipped to streamline meetings to address specific learning goals.

When asked to assess the team's instructional talk at a team tune-up, one teacher commented, "To be truthful, last year team meetings were nearly all logistics. ... We never set an agenda item around the improvement of teaching and learning. Now 15% is used for logistics and 85% is used to address topics on developing better strategies for teaching to improve student outcomes."

An examination of instructional talk and the activities occurring in teacher teams provided powerful insights to developing teacher learning and ultimately student learning.

2. Connecting team conversations to classroom planning and practice

Elmhurst Elementary put a high priority on inclusionary practices and reducing the achievement gap for special education students. For many years, middle school teachers had graded and accommodated special needs students in an individual manner. Early in the year, the issue became a focus of a day-long workshop, where teachers hammered out consistent policies. They made a coordinated effort to ensure that lessons and exams were not "watered down" for special needs students.

Two initiatives proved to affect teacher practice and student achievement. First was the creation of a coherent grading policy by content area. Second, building on the expertise of colleagues and the team's special ed teachers, each teacher's repertoire was expanded to include the best inclusive practices of the team (e.g. "lesson launches" incorporating differentiated instruction, cross-content sharing of identified gaps, accommodating assignments and exams for special education students in a consistent and sensitive way).

> "Now 15% is used for logistics and 85% is used to address topics on developing better strategies for teaching to improve student outcomes."
> *— Teacher assessing the team*

The change was dramatic. On accommodated-in-class assessments, the majority of special ed students showed an improvement of at least 10 percentage points, and 70% received a grade of C or better.

Figures for homework assignment completion and quality showed that special education students, with few exceptions, were completing required assignments, and regular education students were doing so with increased frequency. No failures were noted for the homework portion of students' grades, whereas in previous years, the failure rate in the homework category had been as high as 50%.

According to one 6th-grade teacher, "We are no longer spending time addressing whether or not we need to accommo-

date lessons. We now are entering into the discussion of how to best accommodate lessons and when modification is necessary."

The middle school math teachers, concerned with students' inability to write about their mathematical thinking, met in content-specific teams. A math teacher commented, "Reflection pieces in mathematics experienced major gains in quality and length. Students have benefited from the specific procedures we've developed. Now students respond to reflection questions in a way that is consistent throughout the middle grades."

3. Providing opportunities to improve practice in concrete forms

Teachers on the 6th-grade team voiced concern that class beginnings were not as efficient as they might be. One teacher videotaped the first 10 minutes of a number of his classes and chose one clip to analyze with the team. After commenting on this video, other teachers examined their own 10-minute openings. Teachers decided to create a consistent protocol for the first 10 minutes of class, addressing the conundrum of effective class beginnings and looking for time to complete lessons. Their collaborative solution ultimately saved an average of seven minutes per class for many team members, but more important was a significant improvement in class behavior. Discipline issues were minimized during the entire class period as a result of consistent and predictable expectations and routines established at the beginning of the class period.

4. Developing and enacting practices that ensure individual and mutual accountability

The kindergarten team, made up of teachers with very different teaching styles and beliefs about teaching, decided to address reading instruction as a team. One of the teachers, a part-time literacy coach, reviewed the many facets of Readers and Writers Workshop instruction in team meetings, and then taught the team how to analyze text to decide which teaching points were appropriate for their students. Subsequently, the team held conversations about student work produced as a result of this new learning. When, in a team meeting, it became clear that one of the teachers had not followed the agreed-upon plan of action, the team put pressure on that teacher to follow the pedagogy in pursuit of increased student learning.

According to teacher reports, consistent practices developed by the 7th/8th-grade team were instrumental in doubling the number of students on the honor roll over four terms.

Improvements in discipline showed up in surprising ways. The dress code at Elmhurst Elementary, in place for three years, called for all students to wear khaki slacks or skirts and a blue shirt. Compliance had never been 100%, but during the 2007-08 academic year, compliance rose steadily from 27% to 71%. Teachers attributed the increase in compliance to students understanding a consistent set of expectations, rewards, and consequences implemented by all staff.

One teacher commented, "These improvements were possible because of the consistent implementation of incentives and the changes made to instruction as a result of teaming. Furthermore, the children were aware of the ways in which their teachers were working together and the efforts made by the entire team."

PRACTICES TRANSFORMED

At year's end, teachers assessed their own and their team's progress and arrived at goals to work on the following year. Teachers identified the coordination of leadership responsibilities as an issue and targeted team planning in subgroups as a goal, with more content-specific professional development as part of the mix. They put creation of a regular schedule of peer/group observations on their "want list" and recognized they needed better communications between classroom and special education teachers. All team members agreed to work on developing and refining leadership skills.

Most important to us were the positive signs that a Millennium Team model had the potential to provide tangible improvements in teaching practice and student achievement by transforming teacher talk and teaching practice.

On a final note: The well-worn phrase "Change is a process, not an event" proved to be more than just a cliché in the case of Elmhurst Elementary. The year's trajectory was not entirely smooth, and there were ups and downs. There were periods of hope and growth coupled with periods of conflict and dissatisfaction. Euphoria sometimes followed disappointment. Yet one very important lesson learned is that no matter how skilled the participants in school change, a lot of patience is required. It all takes time, energy, and a willingness to stick with the process. The benefits that teachers realized through their own experiences bore this out.

It all takes time, energy, and a willingness to stick with the process.

REFERENCE

Troen, V. & Boles, K.C. (2003). *Who's teaching your children? Why the teacher crisis is worse than you think and what can be done about it.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

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TEAM TUNE-UP

Examining team transcripts

Purpose	Use this worksheet to examine documentation of team meetings in light of goals the team has established.
Materials	Copies of team transcripts, yellow and pink highlighters, pencils.
Time	45-60 minutes.

DIRECTIONS

1	• On the copies of the transcripts, draw a line between the major portions of the meeting (whenever the group turned its attention to a new subject). • On the right for each section, record the core content being discussed (e.g. announcements, math assessment, reading lesson, writing strategy).

2	• Use a yellow highlighter to highlight questions that were raised during the meeting.
	• Use a pink highlighter to note when concerns were raised.
	• To the right of the text, use a pencil to draw an arrow to the text where the question or concern was answered (if there was a response).
	  • What do you notice about the kinds of questions that people asked?
	  • Did the group tend to pick up and respond to questions or bypass questions? Any thoughts about why?
	  • How did people tend to respond to questions and concerns (e.g. provide strategies, direct to resources, put on next agenda, empathetic response, etc.)?

3	• Overall, what kinds of talk do you notice in this meeting? • Here are some possibilities in the blue box at right. • Put a check mark next to those you find in evidence. • What other types of talk can be added to the list?
4	• When and how are students being discussed (i.e. generic references — ELLs, special education students; specific references — individual students; positive or negative references)? • What came before and caused teachers to introduce students into the conversation?

Clarifying comments and questions	☐
Coordinating work across classes	☐
Directions (this is how you do something)	☐
Announcements/updates	☐
Planning/organizing	☐
Directive (you need to do this)	☐
Making connections	☐
Providing background/history	☐
Explaining/providing rationale	☐
Sharing	☐
Generating ideas, alternatives	☐
Observational comments	☐
Humorous comments/jokes	☐
Other:	

5	• When are documents, resources, or other artifacts being distributed? • Are they actually being discussed by the group, just referenced, or just distributed? • How are they being used? Are they advancing the group discussion and learning during the team meeting?
6	• Who is leading the conversation? • Circle the name of the person leading/facilitating the conversation. • Circle the names of others as/if this role shifts during the meeting.
7	• Who is talking, and who is not? • What do you notice about taking turns and the length of people's contributions?
8	• Is there evidence in the transcript of a facilitator, a timekeeper, a note-taker, or a norms process observer? • Do they appear to influence the team's work in any way?

Source: Adapted with permission from Boles, K., Henry, S., & Troen, V. (2007). *Examining team transcripts. The transformative power of teacher teams.* Unpublished manuscript.