



Teacher Teams Getting Results

Summarized by Kim Marshall

In this meaty *Elementary School Journal* article, researchers Ronald Gallimore, Bradley Ermeling, William Saunders, and Claude Goldenberg report on their study of grade-level teacher teams in Title I schools. Prior to this project, two of the authors had a number of unsuccessful experiences trying to raise student achievement by giving workshops to principals. It turned out that the principals were ineffective at getting teacher teams to focus on teaching and learning, and the results were dismal.

So the researchers developed a more aggressive plan that included working directly with teacher teams in summer and winter institutes. They embedded the following “change elements” in schools:

- Common student learning goals;
- Meaningful interim assessments and indicators of student progress;
- Facilitation and support for grade-level teams;
- Distributed leadership that “supports and pressures goal attainment.”
- All this took place at three levels within the school: grade-level team meetings; an instructional leadership team (ILT) composed of representatives from each grade level, a reading coach, the principal, and a researcher; and all-school faculty meetings. In the first school trying this more focused approach, teachers’ attitudes changed and there were dramatic gains in student achievement. The researchers decided to scale up the experiment to more schools, and studied the results over a period of six years.

The heart of the process was the work of grade-level teams, which met 2–4 hours a month to solve what teachers agreed were their students’ most significant learning problems. The collaborative inquiry process had these components:

- Set an explicit goal for student learning;
- Plan instruction to address it;
- Implement the plan in classrooms;
- Use common assessments to track student work and monitor progress;
- If the goal was not achieved, circle back to try different approaches;
- If the goal is achieved, move on to a new goal.

Teams received support from the principal, the researcher, and members of the ILT. The whole faculty discussed progress in regular meetings, using time that previously had been devoted to school operations.

What was the mechanism of these dramatic gains? Clearly teachers planned better lessons, were more aware of



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student needs, and used more effective instructional practices in their classrooms. But what drove those improvements? Here is the researchers' analysis:

- *Changes in attribution*—Focus groups and interviews revealed that teachers' attitudes shifted as a result of the new dynamic within grade-level teams. As teachers tried new practices learned from team discussions, they began to attribute student gains to their own teaching—in contrast with teachers in schools not implementing these practices, who tended to attribute student achievement to external factors such as socioeconomic conditions, students' poor proficiency in English, lack of ability, or low levels of parent involvement.
- *A sense of efficacy*—The work of teacher teams changed the *I taught it and they didn't learn it*, activity-driven approach. Instead, when an approach didn't work, teachers took responsibility for trying different approaches until they saw progress. "We hypothesize," write the authors, "that critical learning opportunities arise when teachers focus on a specific student need over a period of time and shift to an emphasis on *figuring out* an instructional solution that produces a detectable improvement in learning, not just *trying out* a variety of instructional activities or strategies... We claim it is not how long a team works on a problem that determines if they see a cause-effect connection, but whether they persist until it is solved."
- *A balance of administrative support and pressure*—This dynamic won't take place unless the principal supports teacher teams and holds them accountable for keeping up the inquiry/improvement process until they see tangible results. Teachers said it matters that the principal builds trust and isn't critical or evaluative, keeping students' interests front and center. It's also important that the principal remains "firm," teachers said, pushing back against statements like, "Well, I don't know if I can do this" and "I don't know if my children can do this." One teacher remembered the principal saying, "Look, this is what you need to do. So like it or not, do it."

The researchers identify a number of key elements to getting this dynamic operating in a school:

- **Job-alike teams**—Ideally, 3–7 teachers who teach the same subject or course to students at the same grade level, for example, third grade, seventh-grade pre-algebra, or ninth-grade English. "Absent a common task immediately relevant to each teacher's own classroom, it is difficult to create and sustain the kind of inquiry cycle observed in the scale-up schools and others in which we now work," say the researchers.
- **Clear goals**—"To be successful," they write, "teams need to set and share goals to work on that are immediately applicable to their classrooms. Without such goals, teams will drift toward superficial discussions and truncated efforts to test alternative instruction."
- **Trained peer-facilitators**—Skillful facilitation is vital to sustaining teams to the point where they begin showing results. The role can be shared, but few teams can succeed without it. Peer leadership is preferable to administrators leading meetings, say the authors. "Peer-facilitators are uniquely positioned to model 'a leap of faith,' frame the work as an investigation, help the group 'stick with it,' and guide protocol use as a full



participant in the inquiry process. Teacher-facilitators are trying out in their classrooms the same lessons as everyone else in the group.” Another advantage is that peer leaders free up literacy and math coaches and administrators to move from team to team and provide support where it’s most needed.

- **Inquiry-focused protocols**—Each team followed these steps: identify appropriate and worthwhile student learning goals; find or develop appropriate means to assess student progress; bring to the table expertise from colleagues and others to accomplish the goals; plan, prepare, and deliver lessons; use evidence from classrooms to evaluate results; and reflect on the process to decide what to do next. This structured approach increased teachers’ focus on cause-effect planning, getting them to pay close attention to students’ needs, gather helpful classroom artifacts and observations, constantly question existing instructional practices, look carefully at alternative approaches, and use evidence to make decisions.
- **Stable settings**—“For teams to stick with the protocol long enough to see and attribute improved student learning to their teaching,” say the researchers, “there must be a stable, protected setting in which the work of inquiry can get done. With multiple, uncoordinated reform initiatives hitting schools, time for teacher inquiry is often sacrificed for competing demands, such as mandated PD or the responsibilities for parent and IEP conferences. The immediacy and urgency of day-to-day operations gobble up time and put everyone’s commitment to the test. In candid moments, teachers battling overload and fatigue report that there are times they feel like just going home, or completing other tasks rather than attending a grade-level meeting to engage in their team’s chosen inquiry.” Administrative vision and support are crucial to keeping the process going—time for meetings, consistent membership, facilitation, and support.

Here are several examples of cause-effect connections from teacher teams using this process:

- *Grade 1 writing*—A first-grade team decided to focus on getting students to write multi-sentence narratives about a single event. At first, most of the team members doubted that first graders could write at this level, but urged on by their peer facilitator, they took the leap of faith and tried a number of new classroom practices, gave regular assessments, and scored them collaboratively. By March, almost all students were writing more than ten sentences of coherent narrative. Teachers said they accomplished this because of daily modeling and think-aloud practices and also teacher-led sharing and feedback sessions.
- *Grade 3 math*—A third-grade team worked on helping students understand multiplication as repeated addition. What was challenging for the teachers was presenting a difficult problem and letting students struggle with it. “Indeed,” write the authors, “teachers felt it was somehow unfair to students to ‘withhold’ the directed lesson(s) until after students had grappled with the problem.” Helped by their math coach (a former teacher at the school), teachers tried the new approach, introducing problems, asking supportive questions while groups of students worked on the problems, leading student discussions about their solutions, and explaining how their solutions connected to the concept of multiplication as repeated addition. By the end of the year, teachers had significantly changed their classroom practices and felt they planned, taught, and observed students better than before.



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- *Grade 4–5 reading*—A team of fourth/fifth-grade teachers decided to focus on reading comprehension to prepare for new open-ended questions on state assessments that asked students to summarize grade-level text and explain the theme or main idea. Teachers were initially skeptical that students had the writing skills to work at this level, but following the lead of their peer facilitator and a literacy coach, they broke down the challenge into manageable chunks. They tried teacher modeling of how to write a summary, conferencing with groups of students and one-on-one, and getting students working in pairs writing responses. What proved most effective was leading student discussions of sample responses, comparing one scored as a 1 to a 2, a 2 to a 3, and a 3 to a 4. By the end of the year, virtually all students improved at least one level on a 4-3-2-1 rubric.
- *Middle-school ESL*—A middle-school team focused on getting students to use correct capitalization and punctuation. Teachers taught the rules early in the year, got students writing every day, and constantly reinforced key lessons in context. By January, over 90 percent of students were using capitals and end punctuation correctly.
- *High-school chemistry*—A chemistry team worked on improving students' analysis of data in written lab report conclusions, having found that students weren't taking the time to do this properly—or perhaps they had never been taught how to do it properly. Teachers developed a series of bite-sized data-analysis activities and had small groups of students write a synopsis of what the evidence told them. Teachers then formed larger groups, had students combine their data, and then asked them to present conclusions to the whole class. "We found when given time and structure, students had no problem correctly analyzing data," said one teacher. "It was beautiful!"

Source: Marshall, K. (2009, October 25). *Marshall memo: A weekly round-up of important ideas and research in K-12 education*. #307, summarizing Gallimore, R., Ermeling, B., Saunders, W., & Goldenberg, C. (2009, May). Moving the learning of teaching closer to practice: Teacher education implications of school-based inquiry teams in *The Elementary School Journal*, (109)5, 537–553.