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How Teaming Affects Art and the Other “Non-Core” Or—Are You a RAT or a Mouse?

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Schools have increasingly made the transition from a junior high to a middle school structure. With this change, new directions in school organization have been created to meet the needs of the middle school student. One such direction is the development of interdisciplinary curriculum through teaming. Here, the larger student population of a school is divided into smaller groups (teams). Teams normally consist of students from the same grade level; however, some mixture may occur with special needs students and with the gifted and talented. Students within each team encounter the same teachers throughout the day. Students in these “schools within schools” often have classrooms in close proximity so that members are further motivated to bond with their team. Moreover, teachers on the team have a common planning period allowing them to track student progress and behavior, plan interdisciplinary curriculum, manipulate scheduling, and organize field trips or other learning activities independent of the larger school administration.

This common planning period for teachers is an essential ingredient to teaming. Providing this time within the school day often requires that students be scheduled in art, music, physical education, family consumer science, or technology classes during this period. Teachers in these subjects are often not a member of the “core” team, but rather become a team unto themselves (sometimes called the Related Arts Team or “RATS”). As a result, these teachers may occasionally feel their participation, as a team is inconsequential. Problems concerning how non-core teams are identified, how they function and cooperate with other teams, and their relationship with the administration may be at the source of this perception. The following are some problems inherent in the teaming process and some suggested solutions, which may strengthen non-core teams and facilitate a more professional and educational environment.

- 1. What’s in a name?** The name chosen for a team helps the faculty and students identify the team and understand their purpose. Core teams often choose names that suggest desirable academic attitudes, such as “Warriors” or “Pacesetters”. As a result of practicality, the names for non-core teams often seem like an afterthought and may suggest an educational relationship or definition that does not exist. For example, how are the classes in a “Related Arts” team related? Is there really a relationship between art and technology classes that make these members of the same family? Are the classes on the “Practical Arts” team more practical than other classes? Does the “Exploration” team explore where others do not? Even using “Non-core” as an identifier is problematic as it bestows a sense of importance on certain subject matter and not on others. One alternative is to split larger non-core teams into ones that are more homogeneous. A “Fine Arts” team may be made up of those in music and in art or a “Technology” team from those in computer science and technology. However, problems may be encountered as a result. As more teams attempt to coexist there is potential for less flexibility, and a greater need for communication and cooperation.
- 2. Cooperation with other teams.** Non-core teams can be left out of the loop in a number of ways. Due to scheduling configurations, non-core classes often contain a mixture of students from many teams. This usually makes it difficult to participate in interdisciplinary learning activities. Moreover, discipline problems, academic progress, and other essential educational information regarding specific students may not be passed on from the core teams. When

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parent conferences occur, the core team may neglect input from non-core areas. If student conferences are held, they are more likely to occur when the student is in a non-core class, thereby inhibiting the participation of these teachers.

To counteract such possibilities and to facilitate a relationship based on mutual respect and professionalism, the following are suggested for non-core teams:

- a. Do not wait to be invited to participate in an interdisciplinary unit of instruction. Find out what units core teams intend to cover and make yourself not only available, but indispensable to the process. While your participation may be limited, the respect you glean may be paid back to you later as core teams witness the learning experiences found in your area of expertise.
- b. Share team meeting “minutes” with all teams and expect to see theirs as well. This can be an important method for understanding what activities, issues, and student concerns are going on within each team. It can also foster respect for the non-core teams once educational issues discussed in team meetings are shared. Obviously then, it is important that team minutes reflect commitment to vital educational concerns.
- c. Insist that field trips and other education experiences that interrupt non-core class time be few in number and scheduled far in advance. After all, since non-core teachers usually teach classes at all grade levels with mixed teams, it is doubtful their presence on a field trip will be requested. As a result, field trips often reduce the size of your classes interrupting the educational process and making it difficult to introduce new learning experiences.
- d. As much as possible, dissuade core teams from taking students out of non-core areas for team conferences. While this may be impractical, it is important for teachers to realize that your time with a student is indispensable. Further, non-core classes rarely last an entire semester which makes the student’s time in class even more important.
- e. Do not depend on core-class teachers to discipline students who have misbehaved in non-core classes. Develop rules and discipline consequences that reflect your team’s expectations. Share these rules with the core teams and keep them updated on students who are having problems.

3. Cooperating with the administration. Because the benefits of teaming tend to be better witnessed through core teams, administrators may overlook the impact of teaming on non-core teams. Policy, too, may reflect that neglect. Areas where this may be apparent are in the relationship between the building principal, the non-core team, and the manner in which student grades and assessment methods from non-core areas are recorded.

The relationship of the principal to the team is important. Most schools committed to teams have scheduled team leader meetings, which not only enhance the communication and cooperation among teams, but also build strong relationships with the administration. However, individual team meetings, which typically meet daily, should include an administrator on an occasional basis. Unfortunately, it is often the case that once teaming is established and routine, administrators do not feel the necessity to suggest goals or provide feedback to improve the operation of individual teams. All teams benefit from an administrator’s presence, as their suggestions and guidance is not only helpful, but builds rapport and respect.

Lastly, grades and other forms of assessment from non-core classes should be easily found on report cards and in permanent school records. Due to the limited space and the number of non-core classes required, these grades are sometimes averaged together for semester grades. While it may be easier to lump non-core grades together, this suggests that there is little distinction between one class and another. Moreover, these grades should also be included as part of the GPA and incorporated in any decision based on that average for membership in sports activities and other extracurricular events.

In conclusion, the success of teaming overall implies that it will be a part of our school structure for years to come. Art teachers, along with others, can benefit from this and other changes if we stay committed to the process of finding solutions to problems, building bridges when needed, and advocating the excellence within our programs.