



Part 1

Strong Relationships

Before you begin this journey, close your eyes and think about the best teacher you ever had. Can you remember a specific lesson? Do you recall a special conversation the two of you shared? What did this teacher do that set him or her apart from others who contributed to your education?

When we ask colleagues these questions, they never say, “Oh, Mr. Green was the neatest lesson planner” or “Ms. Smith always made sure we sat at our desks with our feet glued to the floor.”

Instead, the best teachers in our memories are those who made strong emotional connections. They touched our hearts as well as our heads. They inspired us to follow them into the profession.

On our team, the curriculum is not the central focus. We teach students first and then the content. Relationships are at the forefront of every activity, and that is true whether we are working with our students or our colleagues.

Before criticizing us for being intellectually soft or too touchy-feely, please examine the results of this approach and explore the full cycle of teaming described in this book. We have experienced great success when using teamwork to build relationships, accelerate learning in multiple dimensions, and improve our personal and professional practices. The synergy is the secret.





ChapterOne

Learning to Work with Colleagues

“You really love each other,” said Lauren. “You respect each other, and you show us every day how to work together.”

“We know you disagree sometimes, but you get through it. We want to be the same way with each other,” other students told us.

To help us prepare for a presentation at National Middle School Association’s annual conference, we invited fifteen students to Monique’s house one summer afternoon so that we could interview them about effective teaming practices. Their insights caused us to revisit a topic we have debated over the years, namely whether teachers who collaborate must also be friends.

We were not buddies when we began working together, although we are now. The strong personal bonds we’ve formed have enriched us, to be sure, but they are not the key to our success in the classroom. Rather, respectful, trusting professional relationships are what sustain us.

“For teachers, teams provide the kind of collaborative work group that is increasingly viewed as vital to organizational productivity across a wide range of professions,” Anthony Jackson and Gayle Davis write in *Turning Points 2000*. “The shared insights, critique, conjecture, search for evidence, discussion of lessons learned, prodding, probing, and small celebrations of success that permeate the conversations of effective teams are the primary means by which teachers create their professional knowledge about teaching” (128).

Establishing a collaborative working relationship begins with simple plans that all instructional teams can make to build unity. When a new team forms, members should focus on three activities — developing common goals, examining each other’s core beliefs, and identifying the strengths that each person brings to the team — to set the stage for productive interactions.

Each year when we begin discussing our educational goals, we shoot for the stars. Our conversations focus on global concepts that will guide our work. Initially, we had one, broad vision: *all students will be successful*. This made sense in theory but proved difficult to quantify in practice. So we kept refining, adding layers and details that would help us hit specific targets and evaluate our progress while not losing sight of the broader mission.

One year many of our students had long histories of misbehavior in school and significantly weak reading skills. We realized that our goals for the year would have to address these deficits. So we set a very specific target for social development: We will have at least 95 percent of our students end the year with no behavior referrals. To address the poor reading skills, we decided to focus on a literacy standard from our language arts curriculum in all core subjects. We used a team target to address the dismal reading performance: All core classes will address literacy components such as reading, writing, viewing, speaking, and visually representing so that each student will improve reading comprehension and language skills as they maintain at least a C average in core subjects.

Setting goals based on student achievement is a reminder that teaming should represent more than the adoption of a common discipline plan or a series of jointly supervised fun activities. Working as a collaborative team helps us develop a systematic approach to student success.

To reach the point where we can authentically collaborate for students' benefit, we must build our team focus through open and honest dialogue. Prior to the start of each school year, we share our opinions about basic questions such as the following:

- Why did you become a teacher?
- What are the best methods of instruction to engage students?
- What is the strongest asset you bring to a team?
- What are your thoughts about the family's role in education and how we should involve them in our work?

The answers reveal the roots of our personal beliefs about education and how these beliefs might influence our decisions in the classroom. One opinion isn't necessarily better than another, but deeper understanding of what drives a person leads to mutual compassion and compatibility. Such knowledge also helps us consider multiple perspectives as we work together throughout the school year.

Developing a Common Agenda

Once we have thoroughly discussed our individual reactions to formative questions, we use the reflections to shape our team's purpose and procedures. Again, we start with a larger list and then narrow and sharpen the principle points by working in unison.

First, we each list the routines, practices, and methodologies of teaching that we consider nonnegotiable. These are the issues that define us as teachers. For example, Monique will not yield on her requirement that every student will read for forty minutes a day (twenty minutes during class and twenty minutes at home) to build fluency and comprehension. Amanda believes that every day should represent a fresh start for students, and any misbehavior from the previous day must be forgotten. Kathryn believes that the curriculum must not be dumbed down for special needs students; instead, their learning should be supported by inventive instructional strategies. If you explore similar issues with your team, you may be surprised by the number of core beliefs you have in common with your colleagues.

When our individual core beliefs do not align, we look for data to support the use of one approach over another. For example, there was a time when Monique would not accept late work. When students did not submit their assignments on time, she recorded a zero in her grade book. Monique's motivation was to instill responsibility and punctuality. Amanda preferred another approach. She allowed students to bring in work after the due date, but she deducted points in small increments for each day after the deadline.

As a team, we sought evidence of these opposite policies' impacts. We found that more of Amanda's students turned in assignments on time than Monique's, even with the threat of receiving a zero. When questioned about this, students said that if they were behind in Monique's class, they often didn't start the assignment at all because they knew they would get a zero. However, in Amanda's class they could turn in the assignment with only a slight deduction, so they usually proceeded despite feeling overwhelmed.

Clearly, Monique's plan was not having the intended effect. If not for the team's examination of core beliefs in conflict, she might never have discovered the flaws in her policy. But after reflecting on the data collected in our classes, Monique decided to change for the good of the team.

After establishing our team's core beliefs, we move toward shaping our shared purpose. We have found it helpful to restate these essential principles

as “we believe” statements. The following section lists core beliefs that we have developed over the years:

Our Core Beliefs

We believe that the relationships we build with our students do not begin and end with the school day or the school calendar. We communicate with our students as soon as we receive the class roll, usually a few weeks after we have said good-bye to our previous team. We also keep in touch with students long after they leave us. In the midst of writing this chapter, we heard about a former student whose mother had died. The family decided to have a private funeral service, so we sent a card with our sympathies and our current contact information.

We believe in a student-centered environment where all children feel safe and loved. Middle school students spend most of their waking moments thinking about whether they will be accepted. With this in mind, we start building genuine relationships with and between our students from the first day of school. We make time for team activities that lead to trust and respect. We don't stop until our team becomes a cohesive unit in which all adolescents are valued for their contributions. The relationships our students develop do not end once the school year is over. One of our teams independently organized meetings after the students moved to high school so they could provide tutoring for their peers who were struggling with the transition.

We believe that school should be an equitable place where all students have opportunities to succeed. Many of our students are disadvantaged. Ensuring fairness, as Rick Wormeli (2006) points out, does not mean giving every student the same resources, instruction, or assessment. It means giving every student what he or she needs to achieve. Some may require extra time to work one-on-one with a teacher. Some may need resources their families can't afford. Some might benefit by having outside mentors, tutors, or simply a shoulder to cry on. We get to know our students as individuals; then we weave accommodations into the fabric of our team.

We believe that teaching students to take risks with their learning motivates them to tackle intellectual challenges throughout their lives. At the beginning of the school year, for example, Amanda does not count for credit the answers students provide during problem-solving workshops in math class. At first, she only grades the method they use to solve the problem, eventually building to the point when she also will consider the final answer in her grading. In this way, she encourages students to bravely tackle new concepts without fearing

their errors. As the students become more comfortable with the material, Amanda increases the points awarded for correct answers. Together we all strive to help our students become learners who are adept at justifying their thinking. We try to model shared inquiry by creating a culture that focuses on effort and progress rather than recrimination.

We believe learning should extend beyond the confines of our classrooms. This does not give us permission to take end-of-year field trips to amusement parks or visit museums without adequately preparing students for what they will see there. Outside activities can provide crucial curriculum connections and should never be considered “free” days or unstructured child care. Young adolescents need opportunities to see learning in action, to understand that their education has a purpose. We stress service-learning projects that enable students to work with professionals in the community, seek solutions to real social and political problems, and apply their developing skills in literacy, mathematics, science, history, and technology.

We believe that students must be actively engaged in learning so they will take ownership of their education and pride in class activities. Our students rarely sit in their desks filling out worksheets. Our lessons provide opportunities for students to meet standards as they move around, gather data, make decisions, and solve problems. On a daily basis our students are engaged in activities such as blowing bubbles in the parking lot before writing figurative language, waltzing around the classroom during a reading of Poe’s “Masque of the Red Death,” participating in a scavenger hunt to locate geometric concepts in commonplace objects, and simulating wildlife population data sampling using Goldfish crackers. There is a constant buzz of activity in our classrooms as students meet the required curriculum standards through innovative and engaging activities.

We believe that families are essential partners. When our students leave school, they might not mention the day’s events to their families. Young adolescents are notoriously tight-lipped about their activities. Yet families need to know what’s going on so they can support their children’s education. By creating partnerships with families, we help improve the dialogue. For example, after we’d read the Gettysburg Address in class and listened to the soundtrack of the movie *Gettysburg*, Greg’s grandmother contacted us through email. She asked us how to find the music. “Greg said it was very relaxing and he enjoyed it,” she wrote. “And I’m all for anything that will encourage music appreciation. So many children only know rap and hip hop. It would be wonderful to enrich his life with something classical. I guess you better not mention that I emailed you. It would probably embarrass

him.” It’s our job to encourage participation from families by keeping them informed of class activities so that they can enjoy and support their children’s educational experiences.

We believe that teachers should learn along with their students. We are not almighty givers of knowledge. We are also knowledge seekers. We ask students to help us discover and interpret information so they can see that learning is a reciprocal process. For instance, when Monique was asked to serve on a reading committee, she was expected to discuss literacy strategies that were most advantageous to middle school students. Monique had a clear picture of what she thought were the most successful strategies, but she realized she was missing our students’ perspective. So she asked for their input. They reminded her that being able to choose their reading material was the strongest inducement to read. Monique had left this strategy off the list initially because she didn’t think it was pedagogically important. However, as a student named Denzel pointed out, “If we won’t read, it doesn’t matter which strategy you try to teach us. Picking books makes us want to read. You have to include it.”

Finally, we believe that learning is a lifelong endeavor, and we are absolutely certain that every student can make a positive difference in the world. We encourage our students to begin influencing our community while they are still members of our team. To combat illiteracy, which is a significant problem in Louisiana, our students developed an interdisciplinary project, “For the Love of Literacy.” They wrote hundreds of letters inviting schools to participate and spent the year maintaining a website (<http://teacherweb.com/la/dutchtownmiddleschool/fortheLoveofLiteracy>) that featured their choices of great literature. They hosted community book talks, communicated via the Internet with students and authors, created literacy posters to distribute throughout the country, appeared in commercials promoting literacy, visited local book stores to assist customers in selecting good books, read books aloud to children in the Head Start program, guided book discussions for our school’s fifth graders, collected books to distribute to Hurricane Katrina survivors, and filled a library at an urban community center. We confidently hand over the reins of such projects to our students so they realize they can contribute positively to society.

Open for Discussion

Coming to these core beliefs requires sufficient time, reflection, and honest dialogue among team members. The best conversations sometimes sneak up on us.

“What do you do when a child doesn’t have a pencil?”

This may not seem to be a very pressing concern, but it was the first question asked during our initial team meeting of the 2006–2007 school year. Erin Babin was new to our group, and this issue was on her mind.

“Give them one,” we replied.

“Really?” Erin asked, still skeptical. “Aren’t they responsible for bringing their own supplies? I mean, last year I could have gone through a box of pencils a day.”

What we quickly realized was that Erin’s question involved more than establishing common procedures for the team. It required a deeper discussion about our philosophy of learning. To reach a consensus, we had to revisit our core beliefs and see how this seemingly simple procedure fit within the context of our team goals.

If we truly believed as a team that “school should be an equitable place where all students have opportunities to succeed,” then a student without a pencil would not be able to fairly compete. Of course, we also want to stress personal responsibility, a key skill for young adolescents. So we chose a team policy that seemed to strike a balance between those two objectives.

We decided to buy extra pencils for our classrooms. To manage the supplies, we adopted the “shoe method” used by another teacher at our school. This approach involves exchanging a shoe for a pencil. A student borrows a pencil, and we keep his or her shoe (or some other item that students value) as collateral. At the end of class, the pencil and shoe are returned to their rightful owners. By adopting this method, we solved the pencil problem and created a consistent team procedure that matched our core beliefs as educators. Although teams can exist without shared educational philosophies, they flourish when team members can agree about the most effective ways to teach young adolescents. Otherwise, small disagreements, such as what to do when a child doesn’t have a pencil, can distract from the more important work of building team unity and students’ success.

This is not to say that teams must be made up of people with the same personalities. Different styles can be healthy, as long as team members support a mutual mission. Our former team member Larry Chambless used to joke that Monique and Amanda were hot-air balloons floating from one idea to the next and he was the rope that kept them grounded. Because of our distinctive personalities, this was an apt analogy for how our team worked. Larry’s down-to-earth approach reminded us to consider the practicalities of any new scheme. On the flip side, Larry became more

daring and imaginative as he joined us on some spectacular thrill rides. Our willingness to celebrate each person's individuality and make light of each other's quirks stemmed from our respect for shared team values.

Effective interdisciplinary teams ensure that every member makes important contributions. Some teachers, like Amanda, are the dreamers who continually conjure imaginative ideas to engage students and integrate the curriculum. Some teachers, like Monique, are the natural enforcers who delegate responsibilities and ensure that necessary follow-through occurs. Other teachers are like Kathryn. They have great organizational skills, which keep the team humming, but they also focus on "heart" issues, reminding everyone to keep students' needs and interests at the center of all decisions. Truly effective teams perform like highly skilled orchestras, creating harmony while enabling individual musicians to make distinctive sounds. The beauty of working together is that you don't have to be good at everything. Each teacher does not need to create, enforce, and organize simultaneously. On a team, you can play to your strengths while sharing the load. There are opportunities for everyone to work diligently at doing what comes naturally.

A case in point: In April 2007, Kathryn got married and left us for a week while on her honeymoon. During her absence, the school had an early dismissal, which required us to use an alternate class schedule. In the past, any changes would have been marked on our team whiteboards first thing in the morning. However, on this particular day, Kathryn wasn't there to handle this vital but overlooked task. Amanda and Monique spent an hour and sent fifteen emails to the office trying to obtain the appropriate schedule. Of course, all of us had received copies of the alternative schedule at the beginning of the school year. But, truth be told, we had never had to look at the information because one of Kathryn's roles on our team is keeping up with administrative correspondence. We never realized before what a luxury it was to have teammates who managed the minutiae for us. What freedom! We'll never take that responsibility for granted again.

Lightening the Load

Relinquishing control of every duty was frightening when we initially established an instructional team. However, once we became accustomed to relying on others to contribute for the team's benefit, we understood the value of sharing. Most importantly, we have more time and capacity to address students' needs because we don't feel burned out.

National trends indicate that 35 to 50 percent of new teachers leave the profession within the first three years (National Commission on Teaching and

America's Future 2003). Many new teachers cite lack of support from school leadership, weak organizational structures, and disrespectful work conditions as their chief reasons for quitting (Ingersoll 2001; Johnson, Birkeland, Kardos, Kauffman, Liu, and Peske 2001).

When we ask fellow teachers to identify the major sources of their frustrations, few mention students. For many, other issues cause significant stress. Seemingly simple tasks can accumulate so rapidly that an individual teacher quickly becomes overwhelmed. Teams can offer support, such as reducing the clerical issues that clog a teacher's day. On our team, Kathryn takes care of all the letters sent home to notify parents of students' poor attendance. Why should all of us be responsible for this task when Kathryn can do it efficiently and effectively? On the other hand, why should Kathryn or Amanda have to understand every technological innovation when Monique enjoys learning about hardware, software, and gadgets? If we worked in isolation, we would have to perform every job ourselves, duplicating each effort three times!

Teaming enables us to explore the instructional ideas we couldn't advance when we juggled so many other responsibilities alone. Erin Babin described the possibilities in this way: "Because of teaming, I have become more knowledgeable, more motivated, and more apt to take risks. This has led to the implementation of new teaching techniques that I never would have tried before. I have successfully integrated reading strategies within the context of science, and I have seen students make connections across the curriculum that neither they nor I could have made before I was part of a team."

Consider what Kathryn accomplished by becoming part of a multidisciplinary group. During spring break in her first year of teaching, the school principal, Mr. Walker, asked Kathryn to join our eighth-grade team for the last nine weeks of school. Our school district was investigating various special education inclusion models for the following year. Walker wanted to test the waters for a team-teaching model that included a special education teacher working alongside the core subject teachers. Up to that time, Kathryn had been responsible for teaching five self-contained remedial language arts classes. Although Kathryn was excited about collaborating with other teachers and including her special education students in a regular classroom setting, she was nervous about entering an established team well into the school year. When the principal said he wanted her to spend forty-five minutes every afternoon specifically helping Amanda "address the needs of such a wide variety of academic levels" in math, Kathryn had no idea how challenging the assignment would be. But thanks to Kathryn's interventions, Amanda would soon discover why so many struggling students were falling through the cracks.

That first day in Amanda's math class, the algebra lesson focused on multiplying variables and whole numbers and combining like terms, such as $(x + 2)(x - 3)$. The students were following a commonly used strategy known as FOIL (multiply the First terms, multiply the Outer terms, multiply the Inner terms, multiply the Last terms, then combine like terms). Most students quickly caught on to the formula and solved the problems with ease. However, some students couldn't grasp the concept no matter how many examples Amanda showed them; they continued multiplying the wrong terms. At first, Kathryn couldn't understand how something so logical and sequential could stymie the students. That is, until a student cried out in frustration, "I just don't see it!"

As Kathryn looked up at the whiteboard to point to one of the numerous examples, the difficulty dawned on her. "How *could* he *see* it," she thought to herself. "The whiteboard was filled with problems all written in black marker."

Although Amanda was in the midst of direct instruction, Kathryn walked from the back of the classroom to the front, took four colored markers, and began drawing arrows connecting each step in the problem in a different color. Amanda cocked her head to the side so she could see what Kathryn was doing, then returned to the lesson without saying a word. By the next day, every student in the class understood how to multiply variables, not because they had been shown a better way, but a different way.

It was an eye-opening experience for everyone to see how Amanda trusted a novice teacher to weave instruction into her own lesson and how Kathryn confidently provided an alternate method of solving problems in a veteran teacher's classroom. This might seem like a small incident, but it had huge implications for two strangers who were learning to work together on an expanding team. Amanda and Kathryn realized the benefits of including a special education teacher in the mainstream core class. Not only were they able to complement one another's teaching techniques, they were able to meet the needs of all the students in the class.

Growing Pains

It's essential to review goals and beliefs each time a new team is formed, even if several members have worked together before. Misunderstandings will still occur, but circling back to your common agenda can reduce the friction. For example, although Monique and Amanda had taught together for several years, Kathryn's presence caused us to reconsider, renegotiate, and revise.

The same was true when Katie Sheffield moved onto our team fresh out of college. Katie was excited about getting the job in January, halfway through the school year. She spent a large portion of her December holiday preparing the classroom to which she'd been assigned. Katie cleaned out closets, redecorated, and created marvelous lesson plans to greet her students.

When we returned from the holiday break, Katie's first day went smoothly. There were no problems until lunch, when Monique frantically searched through the file cabinet in Katie's classroom to find a paper plate and utensils.

"Who moved our paper plates?" Monique demanded.

"What do you mean *our* paper plates?" Katie asked with a bewildered look on her face. "I thought those just belonged to the person who was in here before me. Why would they belong to everyone? I'll get some more plates. I'll get some more forks, too. I threw those away with the plates while I was cleaning."

What Katie had not realized was that our team shares everything. All of our supplies are located in certain areas of our team space. It is not uncommon for Amanda to walk into Monique's room to retrieve loose-leaf paper or for Kathryn to enter Amanda's room to get markers. What Monique had forgotten was that Katie had not been privy to all of the team-building activities during which we had established our operating system. So, midyear, we had to revisit these procedures so Katie could assimilate.

The paper plate caper led to a minor conflict, which we immediately laughed about once Monique's hunger pangs subsided. However, other issues can spiral out of control when team cohesiveness is lacking.

Though we could easily laugh off the incident with Katie, not all transitions with new team members have gone so smoothly. In another year, one of our principals asked us to interview potential candidates for open spots on our team. This courtesy was extended in an effort to avoid problems that might develop because of incompatible combinations. Because we needed a new partner, we assisted our principal in selecting a teacher whom we thought would be a perfect addition to our team. Creating our team identity was a positive experience, and we were hopeful for the future.

During the first quarter everything seemed fine. By the end of the second quarter, however, we were ready to scream. Our new partner did not follow through on any team decisions. In fact, this teacher ignored or undermined many of the decisions we'd collectively agreed to support and told students not to tell us about the inconsistencies.

We silently suffered until the December holiday. Then, after we discussed and purchased the gifts we would give to the students as a team, our teaching partner purchased and distributed “especially from me” gifts instead. This forced us into action! At our next team meeting, we finally confronted this teacher. We articulated why we thought the individual gesture would undermine the team concept we had developed. As it turned out, our teammate was unaware that the gift would make us feel slighted. Furthermore, this partner was oblivious to how other actions had prompted our animosity and stress. Openly discussing our concerns actually helped us solve many of the problems we were experiencing on the team. It wasn’t an easy process, but it was essential to our later success.

Sometimes professional confrontation is necessary to prime team communications and develop more focused goals. Conflict management skills are essential to team unity. Let’s face it: we can’t simply get new team members when problems arise. We are part of the team for the duration. Conflicts provide us an opportunity to practice what we preach to our students when they are involved in disputes. This is quite difficult in the midst of heated discussions, so it is essential to maintain focus on the problem at hand and the task that must be addressed rather than falling into the temptation of making personal attacks.

For six years, two of us—Monique and Amanda—had worked together on a team without having a serious argument. The two of us often disagreed about lessons and procedural issues, but we had never openly challenged each other’s fundamental beliefs about working in the best interest of students. After discovering that one of our students was to be expelled, however, we both became extremely emotional. Amanda thought we should do more to help the student. Monique thought the boy was his own worst enemy and needed to face the consequences of his actions. After an intense debate, we ran out of steam and started to really listen to each other’s perspective. Amanda realized that we might not be capable of saving every student. Monique acknowledged that, for the first time, she did not have the desire to try. These insights were not easy for either of us to accept. During the argument, we raised our voices in anger and spoke words that did not carry our true intent. In the end, we were actually on the same side of the issue, but we had been too emotional to recognize it from the start.

When passionate people work together, emotions are bound to overflow at times. What keeps them from becoming hostile is working through conflict. After taking time to cool off overnight, we reassembled at the next team meeting to establish a set of guidelines for helping the student who was on the verge of expulsion. Monique agreed with Amanda that we should present the positive

aspects of the boy's school experiences when we met with the district review board, in the hope of giving him one more chance. Amanda agreed with Monique that we would preface our plea for another chance with clear communications to the student and his parents that this was our last attempt to intervene. From this point forward, whenever the student made a poor choice, he would suffer the full consequences of his actions, as specified by school policy.

Conflict is not only inevitable; it is a normal stage in team formation and development. Sylvia Roberts and Eunice Pruitt (2003) identify the various stages of team formation in their book, *Schools as Professional Learning Communities*. The five stages of team building are as follows:

1. **Forming:** Team members become a unified group.
2. **Storming:** Turmoil interferes with productivity as team members learn their functions on the team.
3. **Norming:** A time of reduced conflict and greater collegiality ensues.
4. **Performing:** This is the most productive stage, in which there is clear understanding of goals, desired outcomes, and team members' roles.
5. **Adjourning:** The team disperses, sometimes as a result of faculty changes, school growth, promotions, and so on.

Our team has navigated through each of the stages, and now we consistently operate at the performing level. One of the reasons we can work at the upper ranges of Roberts and Pruitt's scale is because all of us follow the same established procedures. As a result, we no longer have to spend so much time thinking about them. They are habitual, which frees us to shift our attention to integrating instruction rather than continually dealing with discipline issues caused by students who are confused about what to do. That way, the only surprises for students come during fun educational activities.

Establishing Team Classroom Procedures

The following questions address procedural issues we have found helpful to address before the school year begins. Some represent major undertakings, and some are minor; but all contribute to the seamless flow of instruction and learning.

Discipline

- What are the rules that will be enforced in every classroom on the team?
- What protocol will you use for giving warnings about behavior, contacting parents, and writing conduct infractions or referrals?

Grading

- What are the guidelines for grading written work?
- What are the guidelines for accepting late work?
- When and how will completed assignments be returned to students?
- How will parents be informed of their children's progress?
- What procedures will be followed when students want to take home portfolios of their work to share with their families?

Bonus Opportunities

- Will bonus points be allowed on tests and major projects? What about extra-credit assignments?

Parent Conferences

- Will you always meet as a team with parents, regardless of how well a student is performing in a particular class?
- Who will contact parents to remind them of conferences? What communication methods will they use?
- How will you communicate unpleasant information to families? What style or method of delivery will you use?

Bathroom Visits

- How often will students be allowed to visit the restroom during a class period or school day?
- What are the appropriate times?
- Who will take students to the restroom as part of the daily routine?

Homework and Tests

- How much homework will be assigned each night?
- How many tests are allowable on a given day?
- What procedures will be used to grade homework?
- How will parents be notified of missed homework assignments?
- How will make-up work be handled?

Student Supplies

- How will you store supplies and replace missing supplies?

Headings for Papers

- *(Seems silly, but this one is really important to students!)* How will students title their work, and where will they place their names and dates on assignments?

Before teaming, we had to reteach our individual classroom routines on a nearly daily basis. With a traditional class schedule, our students had to contend with seven different teachers, each of whom wanted things done her way during the day: a recipe for confusion. Teamwork enabled us to develop consistency so our students could follow the same procedures throughout the day. They no longer had to wonder how Mrs. Mayeaux wanted them to put a heading on their papers or whether Mrs. Wild expected them to turn in their homework assignments each morning. The procedures are standard across the entire team.

Daily Team Planning Periods

Establishing common procedures does not guarantee automatic acceptance or success on a team. Putting plans into action takes practice and vigilance. During our first months together, we met periodically throughout the summer and thought we had created the dream team. Then school began, and reality set in. We did not have the luxury of sipping coffee at Monique's house as we planned strategies. We were surrounded by squirrely students and bombarded with our jobs' escalating requirements. Fortunately, our principal had allocated fifty minutes a day for team planning, in addition to our personal planning periods. Then and now, this schedule is one of the main reasons we were able to learn how to function effectively.

Some administrators are hesitant to give teachers more time "off" during the school day, but this is a mistake. When used appropriately, common team planning periods serve a vital role in interdisciplinary instruction, provide a reliable structure for professional growth, and lead to gains in student achievement. Moreover, teams that meet frequently are happier and more productive in their work (Flowers, Mertens, and Mulhall 1999). Despite research and experience that have demonstrated these benefits, a recent national survey found that only 59 percent of middle school teams have both common and individual planning periods (Hackmann et al. 2002).

Recently, at a literacy meeting conducted by our state department of education, the presenter stressed the importance of maximizing instructional

time. He stated that teachers should be teaching at least 90 percent of the school day and administrators should not allow time to be wasted on “off” periods. Amanda asked about team planning and embedded professional development. The presenter scoffed, saying he had never seen teachers use such time effectively.

Unfortunately, many administrators feel the same way. We counter that misconception by following the old adage, “What gets checked, gets done.” We have found that teaming time is most effective when administrators do the following:

1. Require teams to maintain a team binder with documentation of each day’s meeting notes
2. Check the team binder at least quarterly to see what’s been happening
3. Pop in to team meetings to listen, observe, and show interest
4. Schedule time at least biweekly to meet with the team or a group of teams for a pulse check
5. Schedule time before the new school year to meet with teams and explain expectations

Because team meetings can easily deteriorate into unproductive fussing fits and gripe sessions, we have established strict procedures for our gatherings. We want to maximize our time together and maintain our focus on student achievement. Figure 1.1 provides a sample framework.

We include these major categories in our weekly agenda because we must address them if we want our team to operate smoothly. However, our agendas are not limited to the items listed. By setting time limits for each topic, we are able to quickly address managerial issues and then move on to more complex instructional concerns.

Monday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Overview of the week’s agenda · Plan daily agenda for the week · Long-term planning for curriculum integration
Tuesday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Conferences with parents (if scheduled) · Concerns/adjustments/new ideas regarding inclusion of special needs students
Wednesday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · School Building Level Committee to review student services and evaluations, individualized education plan reviews, and 504 plan reviews (Are students’ special needs/modifications being met, and are their goals being addressed?) · Conferences with parents (if scheduled)
Thursday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Meet with administrators if needed to discuss upcoming team/school events · Weekly grade-level meeting with teacher coach for professional development (topics may include analyzing student work, developing classroom strategies, discussing educational articles, and new technology inservices)
Friday	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Review anecdotal notes about students’ academic performance and any behavior/discipline issues · Develop list of parents we need to contact for support · Preview instructional plans for the following week and discuss any upcoming tests, class projects, special events, etc.

Figure 1.1 Sample Weekly Team Meeting Agenda

Special education students' needs often figure into the conversation. We use our team meetings to monitor our instructional modifications and review students' academic progress. When we see some gaps, we ask the school's instructional coach to visit and help us identify some research-based strategies that could help. For example, when our special education students were having trouble taking notes from multiple sources, our coach provided us with information about using graphic organizers and other helpful techniques.

In addition to a weekly schedule, daily agendas can sharpen a team's focus and enable members to document their progress. We suggest creating an agenda with a specific time limit for each topic. This encourages constructive dialogue and keeps the conversation flowing. We agree that if an issue has not been resolved by the end of the allotted time, we will bring it up for discussion in the future. Then we move on to the next topic on the agenda.

We keep our agendas in a team binder, and each of us adds to the lists as needed. This way, we don't forget important issues but we also don't interrupt instruction to discuss items that are better saved for team meetings.

We are mindful of how time-consuming and complicated it can be for administrators to arrange common planning periods for teams, so we strive to use our time well. We also provide regular updates to the principal to demonstrate the benefits of having a team planning period. Figure 1.2 suggests one possible framework for reporting information about the team's activities.

The range of items on the agenda varies considerably and can include curriculum, classroom management, and state standards, among others. For example, we might discuss current staff development

Daily Team Meeting Agenda			
Asteroid Team Daily Agenda Date: _____			
Team Members Present: _____ Monique Wild _____ Amanda Mayeaux _____ Kathryn Edmonds		Others in Attendance:	
Agenda Item	Time Allotted	Notes	Resolution or Action Plan/ Who's Responsible?

Figure 1.2 Sample Daily Team Meeting Agenda

opportunities available in the school district or research outside options. We might review our plans for parent conferences or develop a response to a recent family powwow. Other recurring topics include multidisciplinary connections, service-learning activities, and common student behavior problems. Although we try to prevent discipline disturbances by setting standard team procedures and explaining our expectations from the first day, we can't always keep the ship on a steady course. Sometimes the turbulence seems to be bad behavior but actually stems from a faulty procedure.

"Goodness, I am so tired of dealing with cafeteria issues," Amanda said one day during our common planning period. "I mean, every single day our team is pointed out for doing ridiculous stuff like hitting and pinching. I may scream."

"Yeah, I have had it, too," Monique agreed. "But I hate punishing everyone because it really is just a few kids doing silly things."

"So, what can we do?" Amanda asked.

Kathryn cut to the chase. "Well, I think one of the issues is we are rotating cafeteria duty each day, so no one knows what happened the day before. The kids are using this to their advantage."

Monique suggested that we start looking for misbehavior patterns, and Amanda offered to create a checklist that each teacher could use to collect and report infractions.

"So then what?" Kathryn asked, once again focusing on results.

"We need to come up with a standard punishment for misbehaving," said Monique. "I think if they have three marks, we call home."

"I like it," Kathryn agreed.

Amanda also assented and offered to explain the procedures and consequences to our students, which led to consistency across the team and a decrease in cafeteria discipline problems.

Although the previous example reflects a conversation about procedures, the majority of our team meetings revolve around what's working—or not working—in our classrooms.

"I am so excited," Monique said during another team meeting. "The kids really got into the discussion today about [the short story] 'Desiree's Baby.' It was one of the best share circles we have had, ever."

"Did you do something differently this time?" asked Amanda.

"Yes, I decided to use a reading guide like the one I saw Roger Farr present [at a conference] in Portland. This story is really difficult, but the

reading guide allowed everyone to have access to the discussion. I also made them talk in small groups first. Each group brought three things to talk about in the share circle.”

“I think I would like to try something like that in my math discussions next week,” Amanda said, and the conversation turned to how we could incorporate this teaching method into other classes.

These rich conversations, one of the direct benefits of common team planning periods, have spurred us to think and grow professionally. We laugh as we recall the first year when a simple issue such as cafeteria behavior problems would have taken the whole session to solve. We have become more efficient through practice at finding answers because, frankly, we would rather spend the time discussing students’ learning.