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Common Planning Time

Steven B. Mertens, Nancy Flowers, Vincent A. Anfara, Jr., & Micki M. Caskey

All the key documents explicating the essential features of effective middle level schools highlight the importance of organizational structures that foster teaching, learning, and meaningful relationships. *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (National Middle School Association, 2010) identifies interdisciplinary teams as one of these organizational features and reminds us that these teams need “daily or regular common planning time” so they “can plan ways to integrate the curriculum, analyze assessment data, examine student work, discuss current research, and reflect on the effectiveness of instructional approaches being used” (p. 32). Teachers also use common planning time to address management issues related to individual student and parent concerns, the day-to-day management of the team, and scheduling of activities.

Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) also addressed the need for teachers to have greater authority to make decisions that affect the educational experiences of their students. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development noted,

Teachers on teams should exercise creative control over how curricular goals are to be reached for their teams. Teachers should collectively allocate budget and space for their team, choose instructional methods and materials for classroom use, identify and develop interdisciplinary curricular themes, schedule classes, select field experiences including youth service opportunities, and evaluate students’ performance in light of school-wide objectives. (p. 55)

The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development further stated,

Teachers need time to form themselves into smoothly functioning teams. ... They need time to express ideas, talk about students for whom they share responsibility, describe their successes to other teachers, and seek counsel from colleagues on solving problems. (p. 55)

Following the recommendations in these key reports, many middle level schools are organized into interdisciplinary teams that use a common planning time or a combination of both common planning time and individual planning for team members. While the intent of individual planning time may be obvious, it is important to have a clear definition of common planning time for the purpose of this column. Kellough and Kellough (2008) defined common planning time as “A regularly scheduled time during the school day when teachers who teach the same students meet for joint planning, parent conferences, materials preparation, and student evaluation” (p. 394). Also important is a common meaning for an interdisciplinary team. Again, from Kellough and Kellough, an interdisciplinary team is an organizational pattern of two or more teachers representing different core curriculum areas such as science, mathematics, language arts, and social studies. Frequently, teachers from the related arts and specialty areas like physical education and special education are included on such teams.

This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics: Shared Vision — Organizational Structures — School Environment

Based on her review of four large-scale surveys (i.e., Alexander & McEwin, 1989; Epstein & Mac Iver, 1990; McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996; Valentine, Clark, Irvin, Keefe, & Melton, 1993), Arhar (1997) reported that the use of common planning time in middle level schools was increasing. However, more recent anecdotal evidence suggests that more and more middle grades teachers may be in danger of losing their common planning time or have already lost it.

To that end, this column focuses on presenting the research that supports the use of common planning time. We first discuss what we know from existing research, and then address the current gaps in the literature. Finally, we make recommendations regarding future directions for research and steps for creating a shared vision that values common planning time. It is our hope that those who need this evidence can use it to advocate for this integral component of the middle school concept.

What we know about common planning time

Middle level educational research has addressed and documented the positive effects of providing interdisciplinary team teachers with common planning time. This section describes several research studies specifically examining the relationship between common planning time and student and teacher outcomes.

In her book, *Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*, Lipsitz (1984) examined the qualities of schools that successfully dealt with the developmental diversity of

In a case study with three sixth-grade interdisciplinary team teachers in a middle level schools in western Pennsylvania, McQuaide (1994) observed nine common planning time meetings over three months and conducted interviews with each teacher. She found that the common planning time meetings were dominated by discussions of two primary issues: students (47.5%) and policy (40.5%). Additional topics included pedagogy (8%), evaluation (2.5%), and subject matter (1.5%). During the three months of data collection, McQuaide found noticeable differences in the amount of time spent on the various topics. Over time, discussion devoted to students increased and policy discussions decreased. She concluded that “the decrease of discussion [of administrative and policy issues] indicates that once a policy (such as attendance) was fully understood, it was not revisited” (p. 38).

In another qualitative study, Shaw (1993) studied the percentage of common planning time spent in varying content categories. Her sample included four teams of teachers in a middle level school serving seventh and eighth grades in northern Illinois. Each teacher in the school was allotted one hour of individual planning time and one hour of team planning time each day. Over the course of a week, Shaw reported attending all team meetings for the four seventh grade teams, which included 20 teachers. Analyses of the field notes produced seven major topical categories: reflection, keeping track of students, logistics, conferences, instruction, housekeeping, and miscellaneous. Across the four teams, *keeping track of students* was the predominant

Common planning time is a regularly scheduled time during the school day when teachers who teach the same students meet for joint planning, parent conferences, materials preparation, and student evaluation (Kellough & Kellough, 2008, p. 394).

young adolescents (10 to 14 years old). She reviewed the literature on school effectiveness and created an evaluation framework that she used to conduct case studies of four middle level schools that met these criteria. She found that students in these schools reported being better known by interdisciplinary teams of teachers and that common planning time promoted heightened levels of both teacher collegiality and professionalism in curriculum development.

topic of discussion (average of 40% of time), followed by *logistics* (average of 21% of time), and *instruction* (average of 12.5% of time).

Using national data derived from a supplemental questionnaire in the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS 88), Mac Iver (1990) found that 30 percent of schools that used interdisciplinary teaming did not have designated common planning time. In addition, only 36 percent of schools with interdisciplinary teams reported providing teachers with



Teachers working in interdisciplinary teams with common planning time create positive classroom environments for their students.

photo by Alan Geho

two or more hours of common planning time each week. Mac Iver also reported,

Increases in the amount of common planning time are strongly associated with increases in the amount of time the team spends coordinating content, diagnosing individual student needs, planning special events, conducting parent conferences, regrouping, and rescheduling. (p. 461)

This suggests that providing adequate common planning time does make a difference in how an interdisciplinary team functions.

In a descriptive study, Warren and Muth (1995) examined the impact of common planning time on students' self-concepts and perceptions of school climate and teachers' perceptions of their working environment. Using survey measures, they collected data from nearly 500 eighth grade students and their respective teachers in 12 middle level schools in two southeastern states. Schools were classified into one of three organizational patterns: interdisciplinary teams with common planning time ($n = 4$), interdisciplinary teams without common planning time ($n = 4$), and schools with departmental organization ($n = 4$). Compared to students in schools where common planning time was not present, students on interdisciplinary teams with common planning time reported higher overall self-concept, higher levels of satisfaction with school, higher commitment

to classwork, more positive reactions to teachers, and higher overall positive perceptions of school climate. In addition, interdisciplinary teachers with common planning time reported statistically higher levels of more positive perceptions of their working environment. Using the same dataset, Warren and Payne (1997) reported that teachers on interdisciplinary teams with common planning time had significantly higher perceptions of personal teacher efficacy and more positive perceptions of their working environment than did teachers on interdisciplinary teams without common planning time or teachers who were organized departmentally.

More recently, the Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) at the University of Illinois conducted several large-scale research and evaluation studies with hundreds of middle level schools in numerous states across the country. Based on descriptive analyses and correlational studies using the *School Improvement Self-Study*—composed of a set of surveys for teachers, students, administrators, and parents—CPRD was able to delineate three levels of implementation for each school:

1. Interdisciplinary teaming in all middle grade levels with *high* levels of CPT (minimum of four meetings per week with each meeting lasting 30 minutes or more);
2. Interdisciplinary teaming in all middle grade levels with *low* levels of CPT; and
3. Not teaming in all middle grade levels (e.g., teaming occurring only in the sixth grade) or schools that were not engaged in interdisciplinary teaming (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999; Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 1998; Mertens & Flowers, 2003).

The CPRD studies were some of the first to examine the length of common planning time and its relationship to other factors.

Based on these three levels of implementation, CPRD was able to demonstrate that teachers in schools that are engaged in teaming with *high levels of common planning time* reported statistically higher levels of both interdisciplinary team and classroom practices (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000a, 2000b; Mertens & Flowers, 2003). Similar results were found in an earlier CPRD study using a smaller sample of 22 Illinois middle level schools (Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers, 1997). Teachers with higher levels of common planning time also reported higher levels of teacher job satisfaction (Flowers et al., 1999) and more positive

interactions with their colleagues (Flowers et al., 2000a). Common planning time was also found to have an impact on student learning and achievement. Schools with *high levels of common planning time* reported higher levels of student achievement, particularly schools with higher percentages of free/reduced-price lunch students (Flowers et al., 1999; Mertens & Flowers, 2003; Mertens et al., 1998).

Additionally, students in schools with *high levels of CPT* report more positive adjustment and well-being including lower levels of depression (Mertens et al., 1998), fewer behavior problems (Mertens et al.), higher self-esteem (Mertens et al.), and greater academic efficacy (Mertens et al.). Results from these studies clearly indicate that common planning time has a positive effect on student learning, teaching and learning environments, and levels of teacher efficacy and work climate. There are, though, numerous gaps in the research base and it is to these gaps we now turn.

Gaps in research on common planning time

Although a significant body of research exists on common planning time that supports its benefits to both teachers and students, educators have much more to learn about implementing this essential component of the middle school concept. Most notably missing from the research already conducted on common planning time are the “nuts and bolts” of how teachers work collaboratively during common planning time to accomplish the goals of interdisciplinary teaming. We know what teaming teachers are supposed to do during common planning time, such as plan ways to

and student outcomes. What we do not know, however, is how teams accomplish these tasks during common planning time, what knowledge and skills teachers need, or the quality of these collaborative activities when they do take place. These issues are critical to continue to expand our understanding of why teams are successful, and to assist all teams in becoming most effective.

The gap in research on the nuts and bolts of common planning time can be categorized into three key areas of inquiry. The first area that would benefit from additional research is *how* teachers use their common planning meetings to plan and coordinate curricula, instruction, and assessment for their students. Does the delineation of roles, responsibilities, leadership, and organization play a part in creating an atmosphere that is most conducive to high-functioning common planning time meetings? Do issues related to identifying key tasks and the significance of each task also factor into effective meetings? Anecdotal information and observations suggest that some teams use their common planning time more effectively than others do. What is it about the successful teams that enable them to accomplish their goals? More research into how successful teams function and operate during common planning meetings would assist educators in replicating best practices among teams in their own buildings.

The second area in need of additional research is the quality of collaboration and interactions among team teachers during common planning meetings. Since common planning time requires teachers to meet regularly, plan and coordinate instruction and assessment, and function as a unit with shared goals, the quality of their interactions and their ability to balance their individual goals with the team’s goals are

Teachers in schools that are engaged in teaming with high levels of common planning time reported statistically higher levels of both interdisciplinary team and classroom practices (Mertens & Flowers, 2003).

integrate curricula, analyze assessment data, examine student work, discuss current research, and reflect on the effectiveness of educational approaches (National Middle School Association, 2010). We also know that teams who meet more often for common planning time are more likely to engage in these key planning and coordination activities, and have more positive teacher

important elements to understand. Do the composition of the group and the establishment of group norms impact the quality of interactions among teachers? How do successful teams support each other and build on the individual strengths of their members? Research on effective group goal setting, dynamics, and work climate would help further clarify the team dynamics that

are most likely to result in positive outcomes for both teachers and students.

The third significant gap in common planning time research is how teachers' understanding of the goals and purposes of common planning time, as well as their professional preparation on common planning time, impacts their functioning during common planning activities. What knowledge and skills related to teaming and common planning time are most beneficial for teachers to gain? Many middle grades principals struggle with operationalizing the purpose, goals, and value of teaming and common planning time in their buildings. How do schools with successful teaming programs integrate the key goals of common planning time to teachers? Research on these key areas among successful teams would greatly assist principals in establishing a culture and environment in which teachers enjoy success and satisfaction with teaming and common planning time.

The Common Planning Time Project

In response to the need for additional research on common planning time, the Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group (MLER SIG) of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) is currently focusing the first project of the National Middle Grades Research Program on the topic of common planning time (For additional information on this project, please visit: www.rmlle.pdx.edu/research_project.htm). Approximately 60 researchers from across the country have participated in the Common Planning Time Project by collecting data on common planning time using standard protocols to observe team meetings and interview teachers on these teams. Projects such as this one will expand the existing research and knowledge on common planning time and serve to fill the gaps in our research base. While some of the results of this research project have been presented at national conferences, like NMSA and AERA, future plans call for more journal publications and a book, a volume in *The Handbook of Research in Middle Level Education* series.

Preliminary analyses from the Common Planning Time Project by project leaders show that the most common activity teachers engage in during common planning time meetings is discussing individual student needs (Mertens, Anfara, Flowers, & Caskey, 2009). Among the 24 teams studied in preliminary analyses, each team spent an average of 20 minutes per meeting discussing students. Two-thirds of all teams spent time on discussions related to curriculum and instruction,

but for less time (average of 11 minutes) than they spent on discussions about students. Interestingly, preliminary analyses also show that smaller teams (i.e., an average of 113 students per team) tend to spend more of their common planning time working on curriculum and instruction issues than larger teams. Larger teams (i.e., an average of 157 students per team), on the other hand, were more likely than smaller teams to spend more time discussing students.

Additional studies conducted by Common Planning Time Project researchers show promising findings related to the gaps in our knowledge about common planning time. A study examining barriers to the implementation of common planning time indicated that lack of teacher buy-in, off-task behaviors during meetings, lack of leadership on the team (i.e., no agenda at meetings, no agreed upon norms), and lack of leadership from the principal (i.e., no clear expectations for teams) were significant challenges to teaming teachers (Thompson, Franz, & Miller, 2009). Similar findings emerged from another study that looked at common planning time practices in two Kentucky middle level schools. Researchers reported that the success of common planning time was related to a clearly defined purpose and expectations for teams regarding how common planning time would be used as well as a collegial, supportive climate fostered by the school administration (Cook & Faulkner, 2009). Cook and Faulkner also found that sufficient professional development, financial resources, and scheduling priorities contributed to the success of common planning time. Recent research has also shown that common planning time facilitated positive teacher well-being and morale, as well as student academic learning (Cook & Faulkner; Taylor, 2009). Teacher knowledge of common planning time tended to vary greatly, thus suggesting that professional development experiences were warranted and would allow for more effective and efficient functioning of common planning time (Taylor).

Where do we go from here?

Unquestionably, common planning time—regularly scheduled time for team teachers to plan collaboratively within the instructional day—makes a difference for both students and teachers. Given the strong and persistent evidence of the positive effects of common planning time, it naturally follows that teachers, administrators, and other educational stakeholders need

to take action. We offer recommendations for creating a vision for incorporating common planning time into a middle level school and for enhancing the effectiveness of common planning time for teams.

Creating a vision

Middle grades educators and relevant stakeholders need to embrace a shared vision of what is possible—what is ideal—in educating young adolescents (National Middle School Association, 2010). They need to build this collective vision by reading and reflecting upon the research base, exploring exemplary practice, exchanging ideas, and considering the resources and limitations in their local school communities. Once formed, this shared vision must become a lens for making decisions and guiding school practice. Common planning time needs to be a part of this shared vision for what is best for the education of young adolescents.

Teachers, administrators, and policymakers need to champion the implementation of common planning time. They need to share a universal vision of this organizational feature in middle level schools. To this end, administrators, teacher leaders, and policymakers must be cognizant of the profound effect common planning time has on student achievement (Mertens et al., 1998; Taylor, 2009), but they also must be able to advocate for its widespread use from an informed, authoritative position. Ideally, middle grades educators can capitalize on the current climate of educational reform and school restructuring to advance the implementation and increasing use of common planning time (Drolet, 2009). Rather than eliminating interdisciplinary teams and common planning time, decision makers need to guide the formation and development of these essential middle level school components (Taylor). Such a change is underway in one state. In Rhode Island, the Board of Regents is mandating that all middle level schools schedule teachers so they can engage in high levels of common planning time—four of five days a week—by the year 2012 (Drolet). To implement common planning time effectively, all middle grades stakeholders—teachers, school principals, and district administrators—must hold a shared vision and commit to its success (Cook & Faulkner, 2009).

Enhancing the effectiveness

Because many teachers disclose that they have not had enough training to engage in interdisciplinary practices

such as common planning time (Drolet, 2009), we contend that middle grades teachers should be afforded multiple opportunities to learn about and experience the effective use of common planning time. These opportunities need to begin in preservice middle grades teacher preparation programs and continue to occur in formal professional development inservice activities (Taylor, 2009). This will require the identification of middle level schools with regularly scheduled common planning time meetings to serve as models for preservice and inservice teachers alike. It will also require the willingness of experienced and effective middle grades team teachers who implement common planning time with a great degree of fidelity to its intended purpose to serve as mentors to preservice teachers and to novice inservice teachers who are implementing common planning time. In this way, the current and upcoming generations of middle grades educators can be acculturated in the effective use of common planning time.

When considering information and experiences to share about common planning time, we encourage university faculty and professional development providers to convey some key understandings. First, common planning time needs to have a clearly defined purpose and set of expectations for how it will be used (Cook & Faulkner, 2009). Second, common planning time enhances educational practice and fosters collegiality among teachers when the team consistently focuses on the improvement of teaching skills, which includes



Teachers frequently discuss individual student needs during common planning time. *photo by John Lounsbury*



Schools with high levels of common planning time typically have higher levels of student achievement than other schools. *photo by Alan Geho*

discussion of instruction and specific strategies used in daily practice (Rice, 2003). Moreover, teachers find it most fulfilling when they meet a targeted goal or create a product (e.g., team unit, writing prompt, or assessment tool) that positively affects students in their own classrooms (Rice). Third, common planning time should address both the academic and relationship needs of young adolescent learners (Cook & Faulkner). Fourth, facilitation of common planning time meetings by an instructional leader (e.g., common planning time coaches) can increase the focus on teaching and learning (Rice). Finally, interdisciplinary teams with high levels of common planning time foster a positive school climate (Mertens et al., 1998), which benefits middle grades teachers and their students.

Additionally, we recommend specialized preparation and professional development programs for middle grades principals that include a specific focus on organizational structures such as interdisciplinary teams and common planning time. Principals need information about optimal organizational structures and strategies to build a culture of collaboration within schools (Rice, 2009)—a culture central to successful teaming and effective use of common planning time. They also need to be knowledgeable about professional learning communities, how these function within middle level schools, and the structural similarities with common planning time (Mis, 2008). With this knowledge, principals can not only advocate for common planning time, but they can also facilitate its implementation.

Conclusion

In many school districts across the country, common planning time is perceived as a privilege or luxury, and not as a necessary component of middle level education. Unfortunately, in these challenging financial times, it is usually one of the first components to be eliminated from school budgets. However, the research presented in this article clearly demonstrates the positive impact common planning time has on the teaching, learning, and achievement of young adolescents.

The field of middle level education needs additional and ongoing research to continue to document the effectiveness of common planning time. To that end, we call upon middle grades teachers, administrators, and district personnel to welcome and participate in these explorations. The MLER SIG National Common Planning Time Project is an ongoing, systematic research effort whereby data on the status and impact of common planning is currently being collected. Recently, the project launched the second phase of data collection, an online teacher survey. Schools interested in participating in this phase of the project may contact one of the authors of this article. Data collected as part of this project will be disseminated to varying audiences, including practitioners, administrators, policymakers, advocacy groups, and researchers. We are optimistic that this research effort will have a significant and positive impact in addressing the critical importance of common planning time in middle level schools across our country.

Extensions

The authors cite a growing body of research that supports common planning time for interdisciplinary teaching teams. To what extent is your school or district implementing common planning time? What specific factors support or inhibit the effective use of common planning time in your school? Consider forming a research team of faculty and staff within your school, or in collaboration with faculty at a local university, to join the Common Planning Time Project.

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