
Core Function: School Leadership and Decision Making

**Effective Practice****Establish a team structure with specific duties and time for instructional planning**

Overview: Effective teams are vital to school improvement and success. Leadership and Instructional Teams must operate within a clearly defined team structure that specifies team members' duties and provides ample time for instructional planning. Principals should share leadership with team members and allocate roles that are aligned with team members' expertise. Leadership teams analyze data, set school goals, monitor patterns of practice within classrooms, and determine professional learning needs. Instructional Teams need sufficient time to collaborate to develop standards-aligned instructional strategies, monitor student learning data, and adjust instruction to meet learning goals. If possible, teachers should also collaborate across grade levels on vertical Instructional Teams to ensure year-to-year instructional alignment and facilitate communication on individual students.

Evaluate Your Practice: To what extent is leadership shared at your school with teachers or other staff with appropriate expertise? Do your school's teams have written purpose statements and operational by-laws, specified work plans/products, and written agendas/minutes? Are these documents stored in a physical or electronic file? Does your leadership team meet at least twice monthly? How does your leadership team communicate its work to all key school stakeholders? Does your leadership team regularly review a variety of disaggregated school data, plan for professional development, and set yearly learning goals? How much time is allocated for Instructional Teams to meet, and are meetings occurring frequently? Do your Instructional Teams regularly review student learning data to identify students in need of instructional support or enhancement? Are both horizontal and vertical Instructional Teams operating to best address student learning needs?

Introduction

Sparks (2013) describes the power of teams within schools:

Schools will improve for the benefit of every student only when every leader and every teacher is a member of one or more strong teams that create synergy in problem solving, provide emotional and practical support, distribute leadership to better tap the talents of members of the school community, and promote the interpersonal accountability that is necessary for continuous improvement. Such teamwork not only benefits students, it also creates the "supportive leadership" and the process and time for meaningful collaboration that enable teachers to thrive and are better able to address the complex challenges of their work. (p. 28)

School improvement therefore depends, in part, on how well teachers work together with their principal and colleagues (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Research shows that when principals work with a team of teachers, forming school-based leadership teams, the speed at which improvement efforts occur is increased (Pedersen, Yager, & Yager, 2010). Further, school leadership models are more effective when they distribute responsibilities to a team, rather than promoting unilateral decisions and actions (Hanover Research, 2013; The Wallace Foundation, 2013). Such a distributed system allows individuals to contribute in their areas of particular strength or interest (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2001); this expertise is best engaged wherever it exists in an organization rather than seeking it only in a formal role or structure (Harris, 2004). Leadership teams also must have structures that require specific duties for team members and sufficient time for planning. This brief describes how school leaders can best

develop and monitor these team structures that promote school improvement.

What are the responsibilities for principals and all school teams?

The more willing principals are to share leadership, the better students' academic success and teacher motivation (Louis et al., 2010). Redding (2007) states that, "The principals' role is not only to share leadership, but to build the leadership capacity of others in the school" (p. 43). By creating formal leadership structures, such as a leadership team, staff members will grow and develop in their roles, and the principal will be able to share leadership tasks among them (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). The principal must also establish the work conditions that enable teachers to improve their practice (Yager & Yager, 2011); for example, provide professional development targeted to teacher needs, access to key data for planning, and sufficient time for teams to meet to do their collaborative work.

Intentional planning is also required to ensure organization and collaboration among classroom teachers, principals, and teacher-leaders within team structures. Teams need clear expectations for their purposes and roles for team members, as well as clear definitions of explicit team practices they will execute (Redding, 2007; Sparks, 2013; Yager & Yager, 2011). The school's governance policy should include a description of all teams and how they are structured; this ensures that these structures will endure through school leadership changes (Redding, 2007). School teams should also develop written statements and bylaws that describe their purposes and goals in order to give structure and substance to teams, keep members "on the same page," and ensure accountability. All formal teams should also develop work plans and specific work products to produce for the school year, in order to avoid the "activity but little accomplishment" pitfall (Redding, 2007; Sparks, 2013; Turning Points, 2001). Team meetings need a facilitator(s), written agenda, and minutes recorded, in order to keep everyone focused on team goals (Redding, 2007; Sparks, 2013). The principal must ensure that team agendas, minutes, and work products are stored in an accessible file for further reference (Redding, 2007). Finally, the principal should ensure that teams pause for reflection and celebrate progress and successes (Sparks, 2013).

What are the responsibilities for leadership teams, and how can they function most effectively?

A school leadership team is a group of individuals who work to create a strong organizational process for school improvement. They orchestrate and coordinate the efforts of administrators, teachers and other staff, make school governance decisions, and coordinate school improvement initiatives. Leadership teams facilitate community involvement in the development of the school improvement plan and create and encourage parent involvement (Hanover Research, 2013). These teams are tasked with both representing the beliefs and concerns of the entire staff and also serving as a conduit of communication to relay information back to staff (Redding, 2007). Leadership teams often consist of teachers who lead Instructional Teams, other key professional staff, and principals and assistant principals; because of the wide range of experiences within these groups, the delegation and distribution of tasks should be conducted according to their areas of expertise (Spillane, 2005). In addition, a principal does not have expertise in every area of his or her instructional responsibility, particularly when it comes to secondary content areas. Principals should share or distribute leadership to those with content area expertise and should partner with the leadership team to oversee their work (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013; Von Frank, 2011). The expertise of an effective leadership team allows and empowers the team to make substantive decisions involving curriculum, instruction, and professional development (Redding, 2007).

Leadership teams should be situated to access and review a broad range of school achievement, climate, and satisfaction data to enable them to make decisions on the focus and direction of the school and where resources can best be directed; however, professional development on how to analyze and apply data for school improvement will likely be essential (Wayman & Cho, 2008). Leadership teams should examine both aggregated and overall student performance data, in order to set yearly learning goals and make decisions on using resources for professional development (Redding, 2007). Leadership teams at effective turnaround schools in one study examined data disaggregated by student subgroup at the overall school level to focus on areas that need schoolwide improvement, at the classroom level to focus on teacher strengths and need areas, and at the individual student level to address needs of individual

students (Herman et al., 2008). Frequent monitoring of student learning data may be necessary; for example, leadership team review of benchmark assessment data during the year can provide teachers with timely information on where students need the most assistance, and adjustments can be made to instruction and/or additional student supports can be provided (Coffey, 2009). Leadership teams can also work with the principal to conduct classroom observations and discern “patterns of practice” which aggregate data from several or all teachers without revealing teachers’ individual identities. The leadership team can then use the observation data to determine what professional learning is needed for individual teachers, grade levels, or building-wide (Redding, 2006). In order for leadership teams to be effective, ample time must be provided for critical conversations, observation, and collaboration. Teams should ideally meet twice per month for at least an hour, to ensure time for productive and deep conversation (Redding, 2006).

What are the responsibilities for Instructional Teams, and how can they function most effectively?

Sparks (2013) argues that the teacher-to-teacher professional learning that occurs regularly as teachers confer to 1) assist each other in lesson improvement, 2) deepen their content understanding, 3) analyze student work and data, and 4) problem-solve, is often the most important source of instructional improvement in schools. Instructional planning time allotted to teachers, however, is often used individually to grade student work, prepare for their next lesson, or look for additional resources. Hattie (2012) suggests that the most powerful method of planning occurs when teachers work as a team to develop instructional plans, identify common consensus on what is worth teaching, collaborate to share their beliefs of challenges and progress, and evaluate the impact of their planning on student outcomes. Shared school leadership that is instruction-focused and Instructional Teams in which teachers work collectively to improve instruction are components that are shared by schools that show large and long-term improvement in student learning (Allensworth, 2012; Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen, 2007). According to Redding (2006), “Instructional Teams are manageable groupings of teachers by grade level or subject area who meet to develop instructional strategies aligned to the standards-based curriculum and to monitor the progress of the

students in the grade level or subject area for which the team is responsible” (p. 46). Instructional Teams may also include teacher leaders, instructional coaches, and assistant principals (Fenton, n.d.). These teams should be research-based and provide professional development to increase members’ abilities to use distributed leadership practices while focusing on student learning outcomes (Center for Educational Leadership, n.d.).

These teams must be given sufficient time to engage in their critical work, which can be challenging but is essential for their success (Hattie, 2012; Redding, 2007). Twice monthly 45-minute meetings provide a minimum standard for teachers to maintain communication and organize their work; however, longer periods are more desirable for teachers to thoroughly review a variety of student data and adjust lessons (Berry, Daughtrey, & Wieder, 2009). These meetings must have an explicit agenda and focus, with minutes that document the team’s work (Berry et al., 2009; Redding, 2006). Instructional Team meetings allow teachers to maintain communication, analyze formative and summative student data, and discuss plans and interventions necessary to meet individual students’ needs. Instructional Teams that are created to enable vertical collaboration (across grade level) allow teachers to relay their knowledge about individual student needs to the next teacher and align instructional strategies across grade levels; these teams may be particularly effective in high-needs schools (Berry, et al., 2009). In addition, a “block of 4 to 6 hours of time once a month is necessary for curricular and instructional planning, and additional whole days before and after the school year are a great advantage” (Redding, 2006, p. 46). This extended time is necessary for aligning curriculum to standards and/or aligning lesson plans to the curriculum.

Indicators to Support the Effective Practice
A team structure is officially incorporated into the school governance policy.
All teams have written statements of purpose and by-laws for their operation.
All teams operate with work plans for the year and specific work products to produce.
All teams prepare agendas and minutes for their meetings.
The principal maintains a file (physical or electronic) of the agendas, work products, and minutes of all teams.

Indicators to Support the Effective Practice
A Leadership Team consisting of the principal, teachers who lead the Instructional Teams, and other key professional staff meets regularly (twice a month or more for an hour each meeting) to review implementation of effective practice.
The Leadership Team serves as a conduit of communication to the faculty and staff.
The Leadership Team shares in decisions of real substance pertaining to curriculum, instruction, and professional development.
The school's Leadership Team regularly looks at school performance data and aggregated classroom observation data and uses that data to make decisions about school improvement and professional development needs.
The Leadership Team reviews the principal's summary reports of classroom observations and takes them into account in planning professional development.
Yearly learning goals are set for the school by the Leadership Team, utilizing student learning data.
The Leadership Team monitors school-level student learning data.
Teachers are organized into grade-level, grade-level cluster, or subject-area Instructional Teams.
Instructional Teams meet regularly (e.g., twice a month or more for 45 minutes each meeting) to review implementation of effective practice and student progress.
Instructional Teams meet for blocks of time (e.g., 4 to 6 hour blocks, once a month; whole days before and after the school year) sufficient to develop and refine units of instruction and review student learning data.
Instructional Teams use student learning data to identify students in need of instructional support or enhancement.

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