

Shared-Content Teaching Teams

Description: Shared-content teaching teams are comprised of teachers who teach a common grade-subject combination (or, at the high school level, course). Their collaboration typically includes the following objectives:

- Develop lesson plans focused on a common curriculum or text as well as long-term unit plans
- Develop common formative assessments and analyze results
- Determine how to adjust instruction in response to student progress
- Participate in training on common areas for development

Depending on how a shared-content team is structured in a given school, teachers may also collaborate on how to regroup students for targeted, small group support and work together to develop individualized interventions.

Rationale: Effective shared-content teams reduce teacher workload, lowering the planning burden on any individual. They also reduce the expertise burden on each individual: every teacher's plan should represent the shared expertise among the group and any expert supporting the group. Additionally, these teams are a highly effective and efficient venue for experts to deliver content-based, job-embedded professional development (PD). When these teams are structured effectively, they become the primary way that both planning and PD takes place in the school.

KEY COMPONENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION

Successful shared-content teacher teams require the following key components:

1. **Deliberate assignment** of teachers to teams
2. **Sufficient time** and opportunity for all teachers on a team to meet for collaboration
3. **Expert support** for each team
4. **Access to standards aligned curriculum and assessment**
5. **Clear objectives, protocols, processes** and outcome measures for all collaborative meetings

District-Level Enabling Conditions

Districts looking to support schools in creating shared-content teacher teams can:

- In the long term, re-configure schools to ensure grade level sizes are big enough to support the creation of a shared-content team; in the short and medium term, provide regular opportunities for teachers in small grade level sizes to form cross-school teams through technology and/or district Professional Learning days
- Ensure all shared-content teams have access to high-quality curricula, assessments and instructional materials that are aligned with college and career-ready standards
- Provide synthesized, easy-to-read reports that facilitate teaching teams in analyzing the results of interim assessment data
- Provide suggested decision-making protocols, facilitation guides and a scope and sequence of work to help teams use their time productively
- Provide school leaders with data on teaching effectiveness and guidance on how to use this data to balance expertise across teams
- Support the development of teacher leader roles, and associated redesign of career and compensation pathways, to build the capacity of school-level experts to facilitate shared-content teams

Clarify purpose: Before making decisions about how to organize resources in support of shared-content teaching teams, clarify its purpose in your school.

Key Question:

- *What are the core objectives that shared-content teaching teams in your school should meet?
See common examples above.*

MAKING IT WORK: RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

1. Deliberate assignment

All individuals who work toward the same grade and content-based academic standards, including teachers who work with English language learners or students with disabilities, should belong to a shared-content teaching team. This ensures all instructional staff, regardless of the students they work with, are aligned on the required level of rigor in a particular content area. Assignment of individual teachers across these teams should aim to balance available instructional expertise. Finally, each team should have a dedicated meeting facilitator to ensure clear agendas and decision-making protocols result in high-quality work products.

Key Questions:

- *Which position types will belong to each shared-content team in your school?*
- *How will you assign individuals to ensure that, as much as possible, expertise is balanced across teams?*
- *Within each team, who will act as meeting facilitator?*

2. Sufficient time

Schedules should enable all shared content team members and supporting experts to meet for a minimum of 90 uninterrupted minutes at least once per week. Some schools, particularly those with higher concentrations of novice teachers and/or teachers who need significant support, dedicate a two- to three-hour block once per week. Dedicating extended blocks of time to this type of collaborative planning enables the type of deep, critical thinking that teams' core tasks demand. Options for building these long blocks into the school schedule may vary depending on contractual agreements and length of school day, but can typically be achieved at least once per week through any of the following:

- Stack existing planning blocks or planning and non-instructional blocks to create longer consecutive blocks. This may require all students in a given grade level to attend encore/electives or technology labs at the same time
- Repurpose existing teacher planning time during the school day as collaborative time
- Repurpose and/or reorganize existing teacher time outside the school day
- Within the existing day, add new planning blocks on some or all days
- Add new planning blocks on some or all days by extending the teacher school day
- Schedule early release for students one day a week, or rely on community partners for coverage one day per week. This will free all instructional staff for an extended period at the same time weekly. Note that this approach will require lengthening the student day on other days during the week to avoid a loss of instructional time

Note that *adding* collaborative planning time (CPT) for core teachers during the school day will reduce the number of sections that students have available for core instruction, which may result in higher class sizes. To mitigate higher class sizes in core subjects and ensure sufficient coverage during the day, a school may choose to hire additional teachers for electives, rotate students through a technology lab staffed by teaching assistants or paraprofessionals, or rely on community partners. Depending on a school's context, the potential loss of student time in core instruction may be worth the additional time shared-content teaching teams get for collaborative planning.

Note that ERS' Scheduling Tool can help you design a schedule with sufficient CPT for shared-content teams. See the "Additional Resources" section below for information on how to access this tool and others to support the planning process.

Key Questions:

- *How frequently will shared-content teaching teams meet, and how long will meetings last?*
- *When will these meetings occur in the master schedule?*

- **Technology:** A school may rely a technology lab to supplement coverage for students while core teachers are in long blocks of collaborative planning time during the school day. Ensuring this time is used well requires sufficient infrastructure to be in place in the form of hardware, software and reliable bandwidth for students to access relevant blended learning programs.

Key Question:

- *If technology will be used to free core teachers for additional collaborative planning, what hardware and software is required in order to ensure the time is used well, and at what cost?*

3. Expert support

- **Identify experts:** Experts need to work directly with shared content teaching teams to provide the following type of support:
 - Assist teachers as they develop common lesson plans and formative assessments to ensure they are aligned with standards and sufficiently rigorous
 - Co-analyze results of formative assessments with teachers, and use results to identify opportunities for intervention and adjustments to instruction
 - Use the results of teacher observations to coach teaching teams on common areas for growth

Experts should be deeply familiar with the content standards guiding a given shared content team and have a track record of success teaching in the content area that they are supporting. Depending on how a school wishes to delegate leadership across its staff, they may also serve as meeting facilitators. Experts usually come in the form of:

- Administrators: Principals, Assistant principal, or specialized dean or director role
- Instructional coach
- Teacher leader

Key Question:

- *Who will provide expert support to shared content teaching teams?*

- **Align experts' schedules to collaborative planning time:** Experts' schedules should be designed to ensure they can be available to a shared content teaching team for the full duration of its collaborative planning time. Limited instructional expertise in a building may require staggering CPT over the course of the day, or rotating when it's scheduled on each day of the week (e.g. Grade 6 ELA on Monday, Grade 7 ELA on Tuesday, etc.), to ensure available experts are able to push in. Their schedules should also account for time needed for classroom observations and debrief; the information they collect during these observations should inform the type of support they provide to teams.

Key Question:

- *Which experts should push in to which teams' time?*

- **Experts' preparation time:** Sufficient time to prepare for CPT is typically the length of the meeting, meaning a 90 minute weekly team meeting would require the expert at least 90 minutes to prepare. This preparation time is spent reviewing draft lesson plans, generating feedback, analyzing student data across classrooms, and designing training to meet teachers' common development needs.

Key Question:

- *How much time will your experts need to plan for the collaborative planning time that will support, and how will you structure their roles to ensure this time can take place during the work day?*

- **External professional development:** The effectiveness of collaborative planning hinges on the capacity of experts to provide high quality technical support to the teachers they serve. Where this expertise is lacking in-house, a school may need to invest in professional development from an external vendor. This professional development could take the form of instructional support and/or data analysis support from the district or a vendor.

4. Access to standards aligned curriculum and assessment

- **Curriculum and assessment:** Members of shared content teaching teams need to be able to rely on a common curriculum that is aligned to standards as well as any relevant scope and sequence required in their district. High-quality curriculums explicitly support instructional differentiation for the purpose of remediation as well as extension, and revolve around sufficiently rigorous text for students to access. They also typically provide banks of formative assessment questions for

teachers to rely upon. Ensuring shared content teaching teams and experts have access to a high-quality, foundational curriculum will maximize time spent on high-value core tasks such as lesson plan design and analysis of formative assessment results.

Key Question:

- *What foundational curriculum and assessments will your shared content teaching teams rely upon as they develop lesson plans?*

5. Clear objectives, protocols, processes

- **Assign progress monitoring owner(s):** One owner, or a small number of subject-specific owners, should be responsible for ensuring shared content teaching teams adhere to agreed-upon protocols, produce desired lesson plans, and rely on them in their respective classrooms. These owners are responsible for tracking fidelity of implementation as well as student progress, and use this information to determine how implementation needs to evolve over time. These progress monitoring owners are typically a subset of the experts providing direct support to shared content teaching teams.

Key Question:

- *Who will own progress monitoring efforts?*

SUMMARY OF KEY QUESTIONS TO GUIDE THE PLANNING PROCESS

Purpose

What are the core objectives that shared-content teaching teams in your school need to take on?

TEACHER & JOB ASSIGNMENT

- Which position types will belong to each shared content team in your school?
- How will you assign individuals to ensure that, as much as possible, expertise is balanced across teams?
- Within each team, who will act as meeting facilitator?
- Who will provide expert support to shared content teaching teams?
- Who will own progress monitoring efforts?

SCHEDULING

- How frequently will shared content teaching teams meet, and how long will meetings last?
- When will these meetings occur in the master schedule?
- When should your experts plan on pushing into shared content team' collaborative planning time?
- How much time will your experts need to plan for the collaborative planning time that will support, and how will you structure their roles to ensure this time can take place during the work day?

BUDGET & STAFFING

- What foundational curriculum and assessments will your shared content teaching teams rely upon as they develop lesson plans?
- If technology will be used to free core teachers for additional collaborative planning, what hardware and software is required in order to ensure the time is used well, and at what cost?

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES	POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS
<p>There aren't enough teachers who share a grade and subject or course to form a shared-content teaching team.</p>	<p>Schools with small grade level sizes will need to consider creative ways to build-in opportunities for collaboration around similar content, which might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-grade teams in which teachers plan together within a grade band. This might work especially well in a school that relies on looping and teacher familiarity with two grade level spans. • Targeted cross-grade collaboration where teachers plan instruction on specific topics or skills. • Cross-school collaboration, which would require aligning CPT schedules across both buildings. • Cross-content collaboration, in which humanities and STEM teachers plan together. This can have the added benefit of enabling these teachers to integrate their lessons and even shift allocations of time more flexibly across their subjects when necessary.
<p>There isn't enough instructional expertise in the school to ensure every shared-content team has access to an effective teacher or an effective expert.</p>	<p>Balancing expertise could be achieved through the following options, although the trade-offs associated with each would need to be weighed in your school's unique context:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reassign teachers across grades or subjects to ensure a more even distribution of effective teachers across teams. This would rely on teachers' expertise spanning multiple grade levels or subjects. • Repurpose a portion of highly effective teachers' time away from instruction so they can support shared-content teaching teams. Trade-offs include reducing students' access to a highly effective teacher, and small increases in class size elsewhere to accommodate the teachers' additional time outside the classroom. Note that teaching expertise does not necessarily equate to effective coaching for adults, and teachers who assume this type of leadership role will need support and oversight from administrators. • Invest in intensive professional growth efforts for your available experts, including administrators and coaches. • Supplement your in-house expertise with external support from a vendor. Better Lesson's Teach Cycle, for example, may be contracted to provide virtual coaching to teaching teams. • Make tough trade-offs to hire new experts.

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES	POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS
<p>Teachers need longer, uninterrupted blocks of time to collaborate in shared-content teaching teams, but this is hard to achieve within the context of the existing schedule.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Stack” existing blocks of time together. If teachers have more than one block per day, ensure that on at least one day, those blocks occur back-back. If teachers have only one block/day, consider holding two consecutive blocks one day, and none on another to off-set. • Add one or more additional planning block(s) per week, “stacked” with an existing block. Cover by increasing class size, hiring additional electives staff or pooling students for electives courses to free more electives coverage, using a technology lab, or using a partner. Release students early one day per week, adding minutes to other days. • Meet outside of school hours. • ERS’ Scheduling Tool can be used to build a schedule that integrates sufficient CPT, which is linked-to below, in “Additional Resources.”
<p>Teachers may not trust each other enough to collaborate deeply, or may hesitate to hold each other accountable for high-quality work.</p>	<p>Strengthening professional adult culture requires investing in time to explicitly build and sustain relationships. This may take place through a summer institute to lay the foundation, ongoing book studies of strong teams¹, and regular team building during CPT.</p>

¹ A widely used text to drive discussion about what effective look like—and what they don’t look like—is *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by Patrick Lencioni (2002).

Design Interactions

Strategic school designs have many interconnected components. A well-designed, targeted, and flexible intervention block should be integrated with the following power strategies:

- Data-driven Instruction
- Individual Professional Growth

Research

- Sarah Archibald, Sarah, Jane Coggshall, Andrew Croft, and Laura Goe, *High-Quality Professional Development for All Teachers: Effectively Allocating Resources*. Washington, DC: National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality: 2011.
- Linda Darling-Hammond, Ruth Chung-Wei, Alethea Andree, Nikole Richardson, and Stelios Orphanos, *Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the U.S. and Abroad*. National Staff Development Council, 2009.
- Claire Kaplan, Roy Chan, David Farbman, and Ami Novoryta, *Time for Teachers: Leveraging Expanded Learning Time to Strengthen Instruction and Empower Teachers*. Boston, MA: National Center for Time and Learning: 2014.
- Jennifer Poulos, *Making Space: The Value of Teacher Collaboration*. Cambridge, MA: Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, 2014.

Additional Resources

- The National Center for Time and Learning's comprehensive report "Time for Teachers: Leveraging Expanded Learning Time to Strengthen Instruction and Empower Teachers" provides 17 profiles of schools that have successfully extended time for collaborative planning time, including shared-content teaching teams:
www.timeandlearning.org/sites/default/files/resources/timeforteachers.pdf.
- Better Lesson's Teach Cycle initiative provides virtual expert support to teaching teams:
www.betterlesson.com/teachcycle.
- ERS' Scheduling Tools help school leadership teams align its master schedule to its priorities, including dedicating time for collaborative planning:
www.erstrategies.org/library/school_scheduling_tools.

Shared-Content Teams at UP Academy Boston

BOSTON, MA

Context: UP Academy is a charter management organization that serves 470 students in grades 6–8 in the greater Boston area. UP Academy restarted Patrick F. Gavin Middle School, a chronically under-performing public school in Boston. In 2011, less than one in three students could read, write or do math at grade-level proficiency.

Shared-content teams at UP Academy have continuously improved instruction through strategic use of collaborative planning time (CPT). During weekly three-hour CPT blocks, these teams work with expert support to develop common lesson plans and analyze student assessment data to ensure consistent delivery of rigorous instruction to all students.

MAKING IT WORK: RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

1. Deliberate assignment of teachers to teams

2. Sufficient time and opportunity for all teachers on a team to meet for collaboration

- **Weekly three-hour block for shared content teams:** UP Academy's schedule ensures each shared content teaching team has a three-hour block, either in the morning or afternoon, each week for CPT.
 - Every day, students take all three of their core classes—ELA, Math, and either Science or Social Studies—in the morning.
 - On Mondays, students take all three core classes again in the afternoon.
 - Tuesday through Thursday, students take two core classes and one elective class in the afternoon, which frees one content team each day from afternoon teaching duties for collaborative planning in shared content teams.

3. Expert support for each team

- The Dean of Curriculum and Instruction pushes in to meetings to provide direct support to the team, and also observes meeting facilitators. Subsequent feedback and coaching cultivates this teacher leader and supports him or her in the effective facilitation of the meeting. This approach enables the expert to support the team directly and to further develop the expertise of the facilitator, but requires both individuals to take time to align with each other on how the meeting should run and debrief afterwards.

4. Access to standards aligned curriculum and assessment: UP was building from a foundation of having this key component already in place.

5. Clear objectives, protocols, processes and outcome measures for all collaborative meetings

- **Processes:** Each team's teachers rotate responsibility for drafting lesson plans as part of a broader unit plan, and seek feedback during CPT in order to refine and strengthen it. After feedback has been incorporated into a lesson plan, the responsible teacher distributes it for use among the members of his or her team. The following week, all teachers reflect on how the shared lesson went in their respective classrooms and analyze formative assessment data to check for student understanding. The protocols that drive lesson planning, feedback and the review of assessment data ensure that CPT results in actionable, high quality work products for all teachers to use. The following individuals participate in each shared content teaching team:
 - Gen Ed teachers who share a grade and subject area. One of these teachers acts as the meeting's facilitator each week.
 - Special Education teachers whose caseload includes students in these Gen Ed classrooms
 - ELL teachers who support students in this grade and subject area
 - Dean of Curriculum and Instruction to provide expert support

LEARNING FROM IMPLEMENTATION

A critical development for UP Academy Boston's shared content teams was the use of strong facilitators. Defining clear objectives for CPT as well as the facilitator's role has helped teams maximize their time together and produce increasingly high quality work products.

RESULTS

Since 2011, student proficiency jumped 50 points in Math and 25 points in English Language Arts. On 2015 PARCC exams, UP Academy Boston students were #1 state-wide in academic growth in Math as measured by Student Growth Percentiles.

ARTIFACTS

UP Academy Boston Student Schedule: <http://bit.ly/2w0T0Y9>

UP Academy Boston Teacher Schedule: <http://bit.ly/2v8s50g>

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