

# Issue Brief: Collaborative Planning in Massachusetts Expanded Learning Time (ELT)



## INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

The Massachusetts Expanded Learning Time (ELT) initiative is designed to improve academic outcomes by increasing the amount of learning time for students. Schools are expected to provide opportunities to teachers for collaborative planning and professional development as well as add time to the school day or year for instructional and enrichment opportunities. This expectation is consistent with research about student learning that suggests that more time, alone, will not significantly improve students' achievement; rather, research indicates that improved academic performance reflects student engagement in high quality learning activities.<sup>i, ii</sup> Regardless of whether schools have expanded schedules, providing teachers with structured opportunities to work together, align activities, and coordinate instructional decisions has emerged as an important strategy for improving instruction and further developing professional learning communities within schools.

Well-implemented collaborative planning time (CPT) for teachers, according to the Massachusetts state affiliate of the National Center on Time and Learning (NCTL), Massachusetts 2020 (Mass 2020), should incorporate opportunities for teachers to collaborate during the school day to plan lessons together, develop higher quality curriculum, and use data more effectively to improve learning.<sup>iii</sup> As NCTL suggests, "teachers at successful expanded time schools spend substantial amounts of time working with administrators, instructional coaches, and colleagues to engage in thoughtful lesson planning that takes into consideration student needs, effective teaching practices, and clear objectives for student learning."<sup>iv, v</sup>

Schools considering whether to allocate or increase time for structured teacher collaborative planning will need to consider such decisions as where to place CPT in the school schedule, which groups of teachers should share planning time, and how the time should be used. This brief focuses on key themes identified by schools about the implementation of CPT, based on a comprehensive evaluation of the Massachusetts ELT initiative. The brief draws primarily from surveys of teachers as well as interviews with principals in 17 ELT and 19 matched comparison schools that participated in the ELT evaluation during the 2010-2011 school year.

**For the purpose of this brief, collaborative planning time (or CPT) refers to time in the school schedule deliberately set aside for teachers to meet (typically those teachers who together are responsible for students in a given grade or subject area). The CPT time focuses on priority topics determined within each school. For example, CPT includes professional development, curriculum planning, review of student data, and other activities and topics selected by teachers and/or school leadership.**

## ABOUT THE ELT INITIATIVE

Since the fall of 2006 the ELT initiative has supported over two dozen schools across the Commonwealth in the implementation of ELT.<sup>vi</sup> ELT schools in Massachusetts receive state-funded grants from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to expand their school year by at least 300 hours for all students. The additional time represents about eight hours per week, on average, for core academics, academic support for students, and common planning time for teachers, as well as time for student enrichment in core academic classes and/or in enrichment classes. Participating ELT schools receive an additional \$1,300 per pupil per academic year to implement a redesigned and expanded schedule.

## KEY THEME: FINDING TIME IN THE SCHEDULE

Scheduling collaborative planning time is difficult, yet both ELT and comparison schools reported successfully finding planning time for staff in their schedules. Elementary schools generally scheduled teachers' collaborative planning sessions when students were attending special classes such as art, music, or physical education. While students attended these classes, core content area teachers engaged in collaborative planning across grades. Some middle schools were able to create opportunities for collaborative planning by scheduling teams to have the same lunch periods immediately followed by a common preparation period. By implementing "working lunch" meetings, teams gained more time together. Several ELT schools also scheduled one early release day each week; during which all teachers had dedicated time for collaborative planning and professional development activities.

The schedule below highlights one ELT school's approach to collaborative planning. Each grade level team has one collaborative planning time meeting each week, which is facilitated by the school's principal and coach, and focuses on student data. Individual Team Time (ITT) meetings, which occur weekly for each grade level, focus on topics determined by the team. Regular preparation periods are maintained, and teachers may use these to plan lessons individually, grade student work, or communicate with parents or support staff. While grade level teams have individual preparation, ITT, or CPT blocks, students attend specials or social studies classes. The specials and social studies teams have separate planning blocks scheduled.

**Exhibit 1: ELT School's Master Preparation Schedule, 2011**

Time (Min)	Day #1	Day #2	Day #3	Day #4	Day #5	Day #6
7:45-8:15 (30)	Advisory	Advisory	Advisory	Advisory	Advisory	Advisory
8:15-9:25 (70)	A 5th Grade Prep (Grade 5 ITT)	B 6th Grade Prep (Grade 6 CPT)	C Team 7 Prep	D Team 8 Prep (Team 8 CPT)	A 5th Grade Prep	D Team 8 Prep
9:25-10:35 (70)	B 6th Grade Prep	C Team 7 Prep (Team 7CPT)	D Team 8 Prep (SS Prep)	A 5th Grade Prep	B 6th Grade Prep	C Team 7 Prep (Team 7/8 ITT)
10:35-12:25 (105) LUNCH (4 @ 25 min.)	X1 Specials Prep (Social Studies ITT)	X2 Social Studies Prep (Specials ITT)	X3 Specials Prep	X4 Social Studies Prep	X5 Specials Prep (Social Studies CPT)	X6 Social Studies Prep (Specials CPT)
12:20-1:10 (50)	Math/ELA Workshop	ELT Enrichment	Math/ELA Workshop	ELT Enrichment	Math/ELA Workshop	ELT Enrichment
1:10-2:20 (70)	C Team 7 Prep	D Team 8 Prep (Team 8 ITT)	A 5th Grade Prep (Grade 5 CPT)	B 6th Grade Prep (Grade 6 ITT)	C Team 7 Prep (Team 7/8 ITT)	B 6th Grade Prep
2:20-3:35 (75)	D Team 8 Prep (SS Prep)	A 5th Grade Prep	B 6th Grade Prep	C Team 7 Prep	D Team 8 Prep (SS Prep)	A 5th Grade Prep

Source: Abt Associates' Interviews of MA ELT and Matched Comparison School Principals, Spring 2011, Item 11.

Scheduling collaborative planning time also occurred in comparison schools - those without ELT grants. At 18 (of 19) comparison schools, principals reported that teachers at their schools participated in collaborative planning meetings. School schedules from comparison schools suggested that most grade-level collaborative planning occurred while students attended such specials classes as physical education, art, and music.

The master schedule (Exhibit 2) below for the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students at a comparison school highlights how scheduling specialty classes adjacent to lunch can potentially extend the amount of time for core academic teachers to engage in collaborative planning. Teachers could then meet for an hour during these adjacent periods in addition to the additional 40-minute block set aside each day.

**Exhibit 2: Comparison School Master Schedule, 2011**

<b>6<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>HR</b> 9:15 – 9:25	<b>Block 1</b> 9:27-10:27	<b>Block 2</b> 10:30-11:30	<b>Specialty 1</b> 11:32- 12:12 (Planning)	<b>Lunch</b> 12:14-12:39	<b>Block3</b> 12:43-1:43	<b>Block4</b> 1:43-2:43	<b>Specialty 2</b> 2:45-3:25 (Planning)
<b>7<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>HR</b> 9:15 – 9:25	<b>Block 1</b> 9:27-10:27	<b>Specialty 1</b> 10:30- 11:10 (Planning)	<b>Block 2</b> 11:12-12:12	<b>Block 3</b> 12:14-1:14	<b>Specialty 2</b> 1:16-1:56 (Planning)	<b>Lunch</b> 1:56-2:21	<b>Block 4</b> 2:25-3:25
<b>8<sup>th</sup></b>	<b>HR</b> 9:15 – 9:25	<b>Specialty 1</b> 9:27-10:07 (Planning)	<b>Block 1</b> 10:10-11:10	<b>Block 2</b> 11:12-12:12	<b>Specialty 2</b> 12:15-12:55 (Planning)	<b>Lunch</b> 12:59- 1:24	<b>Block 3</b> 1:25-2:25	<b>Block 4</b> 2:25-3:25

*Source: Abt Associates’ Interviews of MA ELT and Matched Comparison School Principals, Spring 2011, Item 11.*

Purposeful and consistent time for planning over the course of the year seems to be an important – and logical – part of establishing an environment that is conducive to collaboration. Collaborative planning time appeared to take place consistently for ELT teachers. More than half of ELT teachers reported that they had participated in collaborative planning time at least weekly (65 percent), and a substantial majority (84 percent) of teachers reported participation in these meetings at least monthly. Middle school teachers reported attending collaborative planning time meetings more frequently than elementary schools teachers (45 and 30 percent of middle school and elementary teachers reported meeting more than once a week, respectively).

**Teachers in ELT schools reported that they spent approximately 90 minutes each week, on average, engaged in collaborative planning activities.**

### **KEY THEME: CONSIDERATION OF DIFFERENT GROUPING STRATEGIES**

The composition of each school’s collaborative planning meetings varied considerably, and some schools rotated groupings throughout the school year. In some schools, meetings were organized according to subject area, and topics included how to ensure continuity and communication from one grade level to the next. At other schools, teachers met within their grade-level teams to build connections across content areas, to coordinate instruction across classrooms, and to strategize about meeting the needs of individual students. At one school, teachers met regularly in groups of four teachers, one from each core academic subject area. Each cluster taught the same subset of the grade’s students, and divided the 240-student 8<sup>th</sup> grade into more manageable 80-student groups. In another school, teachers met three times per week: the first meeting grouped teams of teachers with the same students to discuss individual student progress, the second meeting organized subject-teams to focus on curriculum and assessments, and the third meeting was led by the principal on topics related to the school’s academic focus and school-wide goals.

## KEY THEME: STRUCTURE MATTERS

Teachers found it valuable to have meeting agendas, designated facilitators, and meeting summaries. Overall, more than three-quarters of teachers in ELT schools reported that collaborative planning meetings had a structured format. At some schools, instructional coaches or members of the leadership team attended and/or facilitated the regular collaborative planning time meetings with pre-specified agendas. Some schools involved the principal as an occasional facilitator. Other schools rotated facilitation responsibilities among different teachers. At one other school, for example, teachers were asked to submit both agendas and summary notes to the principal and leadership team to keep school leaders informed about collaborative planning meeting content and decisions, and to provide input back to the teacher teams. ELT schools also varied the format of meetings by using collaborative planning time as an opportunity for teachers to present lessons to one another, visit other classrooms and observe peers modeling a particular practice, and participate in training from outside presenters on particular topics to build expertise.

Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs) often played an intentional role in collaborative planning and typically included representatives from each grade level, as well as the principal, instructional coaches, representatives from special subjects, and members of special education or social services staff. At one school, for example, the ILT routinely designed agendas for collaborative planning meetings and activities, and then disseminated these materials via its membership to the various grade or subject teams. At another school, teachers brought questions about their instructional needs and concerns to the ILT, which then formulated a plan to address them, including identifying relevant research, best practices, and available professional development.

## KEY THEME: MAKE COLLABORATIVE PLANNING TIME USEFUL

Teachers reported participating in a diverse range of activities during collaborative planning meetings. The most common activities included analyzing student assessment data for students in their classes, strategizing about effective instruction, reviewing student work, discussing individual student needs, planning lessons, and discussing behavior management strategies. More than half of ELT teachers reported that they had attended meetings focused on these activities.

As Exhibit 3 depicts, the most useful and common collaborative planning activities reported by teachers included strategizing about effective instructional practices (useful for 80 percent of participants); planning lessons (79 percent), and analyzing student assessment data (76 percent). Other useful, but less common activities (i.e., fewer than half of teachers reported that they had experienced specific activities) included participating in coaching (useful for 84 percent of those who had participated), coordinating with ELL staff, and peer mentoring (each at 73 percent). Overall, these data suggest that teachers who had participated in collaborative planning found it worthwhile.

Interpreting and analyzing data related to student achievement were among the most common activities reported during ELT schools' collaborative planning time. Several ELT schools relied on outside organizations (including the Achievement Network and the Bay State Reading Initiative) to collect and analyze student data. This group of schools typically administered periodic formative assessments to their students, and the assessment results were used to identify strengths and weaknesses on specific skills, as well as growth over time in students' skills. According to teachers and principals, data from such formative assessments enabled educators to target instruction and academic support more effectively for individual students' needs.

**Exhibit 3: Usefulness of Collaborative Planning Activities by Levels of Participation, 2011**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>% of teachers who participated who found this activity useful*</b>	<b>% of teachers who participated</b>
<b>Activities with Higher Participation (50% and higher)</b>		
Strategizing about effective instructional practices and/or assessments	80	66
Planning lessons and instruction for my class(es)	79	59
Analyzing student assessment data for students in my classes	76	66
Discussing individual student needs for students I teach	75	62
Reviewing student work for students I teach	71	62
Discussing behavior management strategies for students in my classes	69	54
<b>Activities with Lower Participation (below 50%)</b>		
Participating in coaching from school or district coach	84	24
Coordinating my instruction with ELL staff for students I teach	73	27
Participating in peer-to-peer mentoring	73	26
Coordinating my instruction with academic support personnel for students I teach	71	36
Coordinating my instruction with special education staff for students I teach	70	42
Participating in other school-based professional	65	35
Performing administrative functions	39	26

*\*Please take note of the level of participation for each activity, as no more than two-thirds of teachers reported having participated in any single activity, and for four activities, less than one-third of teachers reported participation.*

*EXHIBIT READS: In spring 2011, across all ELT schools, 80 percent of teachers found the activity of participating in strategizing about effective instructional practices and/or assessments useful, and 66 percent of teachers reported having participated in that activity.*

*Source: Abt Associates' Surveys of MA ELT School Teachers, Spring 2011, Item 25.*

*Sample: 918 teachers from ELT schools. The binary nature of the survey items does not allow for the reporting of nonresponse rates.*

## **KEY THEME: CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR SHARED PLANNING CAN IMPROVE THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CULTURE**

Overall, ELT teachers perceived that their schools had collaborative environments. Across ELT schools, 84 percent of teachers agreed that teachers shared and discussed instructional practices; and that teachers used common instructional strategies across subject areas. Fewer teachers at comparison schools reported using common instructional strategies (73 percent). Often the collaboration and sharing of practices focused on a common instructional focus identified by the school administrator or leadership team. For example, at two schools, teachers focused on encouraging all students to use T-Charts, an answer and evidence organizational strategy, in their academic work. At another school, according to the principal, all teachers focused on critical reading and response-writing skills.

The additional opportunities for coordination appeared to differ between ELT and comparison schools, where teachers were less satisfied than their ELT counterparts with the amount of time available for collaborative planning and coordination of instruction. Specifically, 70 percent of teachers in ELT schools reported that they had adequate time in the day to coordinate instruction, compared to only 53 percent of teachers in comparison schools; relatedly, a greater proportion of teachers in comparison than ELT schools believed that the amount of collaborative planning time available was a problem (66 and 46 percent, respectively).

Across ELT schools, 85 percent of teachers agreed that the administration and ILT encouraged the development of a professional learning community. Additional time for teachers and staff to consistently meet can provide leadership opportunities and allow teachers to share ideas and strategize together. Instead of trying to prepare for the diverse needs of students in their classrooms on their own, collaborative planning can create a culture of continuous improvement where colleagues brainstorm together and decide on instructional approaches to meet the needs of each child.

## CONCLUSIONS

In sum, our study found that the majority of teachers had weekly (or more frequent) opportunities for collaborative planning time. During these collaborative planning meetings, teachers reported that they had engaged in a wide range of activities, and the majority of participants described the activities as useful. Instructional leadership teams reportedly played a role in setting collaborative planning agendas, identifying resources for educator teams, and centralizing communication about instructional practices across grade and subject teams. Teachers in ELT schools were more likely than teachers at comparison schools to report satisfaction with the amount of time available for collaborative planning.

As schools consider how to integrate and optimize opportunities for teachers to plan collaboratively, administrators are faced with the challenge of deliberately organizing the school schedule to accommodate common planning time. Additionally, administrators also ensure that these meetings have adequate resources, effective structure, and oversight. While operationalizing collaborative planning meetings can raise logistical challenges, the availability of collaborative planning time also offers rich potential for improving invaluable instruction, developing a professional learning culture amongst staff, and ultimately, maximizing student learning.



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<sup>ii</sup> Angrist, Dynarski, Kane, Pathak, & Walters, 2010; Atwater & Morre, 1991; Doran & Drury, 2002; Educational Policy Institute, 2005; Gallagher & Ross, 2005; Hoxby, Murarka, & Kang, 2009; Tuttle, The, Nichols-Barrer, Gill, & Gleason, 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> Aronson, J., J. Zimmerman, and L. Carlos. *Improving Student Achievement by Extending School: Is it Just a Matter of Time*. San Francisco: WestEd, 1999.; Silva, E. *On the Clock: Rethinking the Way Schools Use Time*. Washington, DC: Education Sector, 2007.

<sup>iv</sup> *ELT Overview*, Mass 2020 website: <http://www.mass2020.org/node/10> Retrieved 5/23/13

<sup>v</sup> *Promising Practices: Strengthen Instruction*, National Center for Time and Learning website <http://www.timeandlearning.org/strengthen-instruction-0> Retrieved 5/23/13.

<sup>vi</sup> Information presented in this brief is from a multi-year study conducted by Abt Associates Inc. that examined both implementation and outcomes of the ELT initiative; please see a comprehensive report at: <http://www.abtassociates.com/reports/2012/-elt-year-5-final-report.aspx>.