

Micki M. Caskey, Ph.D., Editor
Portland State University
Portland, Oregon

2010 • Volume 34 • Number 2

ISSN 1940-4476

The Use of Common Planning Time: A Case Study of Two Kentucky Schools to Watch

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Abstract

Interdisciplinary teams with common planning time have been a hallmark of the middle school organizational structure since the 1960s, yet research on the effective use of common planning time is limited. This study explores how interdisciplinary teams at schools designated Kentucky Schools to Watch use common planning time, including the factors that enhance common planning time effectiveness, the beliefs and perceptions of the teachers concerning the use of common planning time, and the topics and activities discussed during common planning time sessions. Results indicate a common vision and mission, clearly defined goals for all types of planning (interdisciplinary team planning, grade level planning, and professional learning communities), and effective building leadership are factors for enhancing the effectiveness of common planning time.

The Use of Common Planning Time: A Case Study of Two Kentucky Schools to Watch

The development of the middle level concept in the late 1960s highlights the importance of interdisciplinary teams in middle grades schools. Interdisciplinary teams are designed to allow two or more teachers to “share the same group of students, same part of the school building, same schedule and planning time, and the responsibility for planning, teaching, and evaluating curriculum and instruction for more than one academic subject area” (George, Lawrence, & Bushnell, 1998, pp. 248–249). Some propose that using this component of the middle level concept helps establish a more student-centered educational experience and fosters a collaborative and supportive environment in which students can be successful (George & Alexander, 2003). Historically, middle grades schools have struggled with the logistics of organizational change and have been faced with the challenge of holistically implementing

the components of the middle school concept, including interdisciplinary teaming with common planning time. To date, research and debate have focused primarily on the implementation of the different components of the middle school concept. Interdisciplinary teams, an organizational component of the middle school concept, help teachers meet the needs of students effectively. An essential element for establishing an effective team environment is the use of daily or regularly scheduled common planning time (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 1999; Mertens & Flowers, 2003; NMSA, 2010).

Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

The components of social cognitive theory provide the theoretical framework for this study. Through the tenets of social cognitive theory (or a constructivist approach), it is assumed that the effective use of common planning time can enhance the quality and performance of middle grades teachers organized on interdisciplinary teams. A constructivist approach, grounded in the works of Piaget and Vygotsky, relies on the social interaction of learners to build knowledge and understanding. Both teachers and students can benefit from a constructivist approach, and an interdisciplinary teaming model naturally establishes a forum for constructivist theory to thrive. Vygotsky (1997) asserted, “Education is realized through the student’s own experience, which is wholly determined by the environment, and the role of the teacher then reduces to directing and guiding the environment” (p. 50). As a result, the need for teachers to communicate with one another and share information learned from their personal experiences with students becomes a critical component to teaming effectiveness. Furthermore, Howe and Berv (2000) identified two key premises of constructivist learning theory:

Instruction must take as its starting point the knowledge, attitudes, and interests students bring to the learning situation, and instruction must be designed so as to provide experiences that effectively interact with these characteristics of students so that they may construct their own understanding. (p. 31)

Interdisciplinary teaming with common planning time provides an opportunity for teachers to collaborate and learn from one another’s experiences. By sharing ideas, knowledge, and personal challenges and successes in the classroom, offering specific feedback on instruction, and working to understand

the needs and experiences of students, teachers can maximize their talents and establish an individualized and appropriate learning environment in which young adolescents are challenged academically and can achieve success.

Common planning time is a specific, planned period of time during the school day in which teachers on the team have the opportunity to meet with one another to plan curriculum and assessments, share instructional strategies, organize team events, discuss student issues, and communicate with parents (George & Alexander, 2003; NMSA, 2010). While numerous formats exist, researchers found that interdisciplinary teams should have common planning time at least four times per week for a minimum of 30 minutes per session (Flowers et al., 1999; Mertens & Flowers, 2004). However, due to the lack of specific middle level teacher preparation and increased assessment demands (Jackson & Davis, 2000), teachers have struggled with how to best maximize and protect this planning time and often find common planning time reduced or eliminated to focus on other school-related tasks.

For the past 25 years, numerous studies have focused on the impact of an interdisciplinary team organizational structure coupled with common planning time. The research primarily focused on the benefits to both students and teachers. In exploring the impact on students and teachers, research revealed that interdisciplinary teams with common planning time

- Provided a greater opportunity for students to be better known by their teachers (Lipsitz, 1984).
- Led to higher overall self-concepts, increased self esteem, and more positive perceptions of school climate (Mertens, Flowers, & Mulhall, 1998; Warren & Muth, 1995).
- Produced lower levels of depression and fewer behavior problems (Mertens et al., 1998).
- Led to higher levels of student achievement (Flowers et al., 1999; Mertens & Flowers, 2003; Mertens & Flowers, 2006; Mertens et al., 1998).
- Reported higher levels of job satisfaction (Flowers et al., 1999).
- Experienced more positive interaction and heightened collegiality with their teammates (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000; Lipsitz; Warren & Payne, 1997).
- Incorporated higher levels of interdisciplinary team and classroom instructional practices (Felner et al., 1997).

In 1997, the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform was established “out of a sense of urgency that middle-grades school improvement had stalled, amid a flurry of descending test scores, increasing reports of school violence, and heated debates about the nature and purpose of middle-grades education” (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, n.d.), The Schools to Watch program, a key initiative of the National Forum, was established in 1999 to identify middle grades schools on a trajectory of excellence based on academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and the structures and organizational arrangements necessary to achieve this excellence. The state of Kentucky joined this initiative by instituting a state level recognition program in 2003. Two key criteria under the structures and organizational arrangements category that connect specifically to the use of common planning time are “the principal has the responsibility and authority to hold the school improvement enterprise together, including day-to-day know-how, coordination, strategic planning, and communication” and “the school is a community of practice in which learning, experimentation, and time and opportunity for reflection are the norm” (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform). Common planning time offers schools the opportunity to fulfill both of these criteria. As a result, schools that had earned the *Schools to Watch* designation would be more likely to have an interdisciplinary team structure with common planning time.

Though significant information exists on how to establish an interdisciplinary team with common planning time, as well as its potential impact on students and teachers, limited information is available on how interdisciplinary teams actually use common planning time. Therefore, the objective of this study is to explore how interdisciplinary teams at schools designated a *Kentucky School to Watch* use the common planning time they are assigned. Specifically, the study addresses three research questions: (1) What are the factors and characteristics that enhance common planning time effectiveness? (2) What are the beliefs and perceptions of teachers concerning their use of common planning time? (3) What topics and activities do interdisciplinary teams address during common planning time?

Methodology

This study is an instrumental case study of two middle schools within one suburban school district in Kentucky. Stake (1994) explained a case study is instrumental when “a particular case is examined to provide insight into an issue or refinement of theory” (p. 237). He added,

The case is of secondary interest; it plays a supportive role, facilitating our understanding of something else. The case is often looked at in depth, its contexts scrutinized, its ordinary activities detailed, ... because this helps us pursue the external interest. (p. 237)

For this study, the focus is the effective use of common planning time in high-performing middle grades schools. Therefore, the schools identified for inclusion in this study had to meet three criteria: reported use of common planning time, a reputation in the state for academic excellence as evidenced by state assessment indices, and designation as a *Kentucky School to Watch*. The *Kentucky School to Watch* designation is a state level recognition that evaluates and recognizes schools that are on a trajectory of excellence based on criteria established by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform. The specific criteria include academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational structures (Center for Middle School Academic Achievement, n.d.). As the criteria of the National Form to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform specified, “High-performing schools with middle grades are learning organizations that establish norms, structures, and organizational arrangements to support and sustain their trajectory toward excellence” including “time and opportunity for reflection” and “interdependent collaboration” (Schools to Watch, n.d.). By selecting schools with the *Kentucky School to Watch* designation, the researchers felt the likelihood of observing the effective use of common planning time would be much greater, enabling them to identify characteristics of effective implementation and use of common planning time. Two schools and selected team members were chosen for inclusion in this study—Lincoln Middle School and Washington Middle School. The names of the schools and teachers have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Description of the Schools

At the time the study commenced, Lincoln Middle School had an enrollment of 758 students, of which 11.2% were minority, 6.8% received free/reduced-price lunch benefits, and 12% had a documented disability. Lincoln Middle School earned an adjusted accountability index of 103.9 on the 2007 administration of the state accountability assessment, ranking them first among all middle schools in the state. Lincoln Middle School was named a *Kentucky School to Watch* in 2007.

Washington Middle School had an enrollment of 687, of which 10% were minority, 17.9% received free/reduced-price lunch benefits, and 17.7% had a documented disability. Washington Middle School earned an adjusted accountability index of 93.3 on the 2007 administration of the state accountability assessment. Washington Middle School was initially named a *Kentucky School to Watch* in 2006. Because the School to Watch designation expires after three years, schools wishing to maintain this designation

must reapply and be evaluated for re-designation. Washington Middle School was re-designated a *Kentucky School to Watch* in 2009.

Participants

Within these two schools, based upon recommendations from the respective school principals, one team from each grade level (grades 6–8) was selected for inclusion in the study. Each of the six teams consisted of either four or five teachers, for a total of 25 teachers in the study.

The three teams at Lincoln Middle School consisted of 13 teachers and had a blend of both experienced and relatively new teachers (see Table 1). The overall number of years of teaching experience ranged from 1 to 24, with a mean of 7.9 years of teaching experience. The Lincoln Middle School teachers had a mean of 5.8 years of middle school teaching experience and 3.3 years at Lincoln Middle School. Each team had at least one *experienced* teacher, defined as a teacher with greater than 10 years of teaching experience.

Table 1
CPT Study Interview Participants – Lincoln Middle School

| Participant | Content – Grade Level | Years of Experience |
|-------------|------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Rebecca | Math & Science – 6 | 4 |
| Bethany | Language Arts & Social Studies – 6 | 2 |
| Mary | Math & Social Studies – 6 | 16 |
| Darla | Language Arts & Social Studies – 6 | 24 |
| Katelyn | Special Education – 6 | 1 |
| Bianca | Language Arts – 7 | 14 |
| Crystal | Math – 7 | 2 |
| Ashley | Science – 7 | 21 |
| Steve | Social Studies – 7 | 1 |
| Michael | Social Studies – 8 | 1 |
| Terri | Science – 8 | 2 |
| Margaret | Language Arts – 8 | 3 |
| Whitney | Math – 8 | 12 |

Table 2
CPT Study Interview Participants – Washington Middle School

| Participant | Content – Grade Level | Years of Experience |
|-------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Nicholas | Math – 6 | 2 |
| Jessica | Language Arts – 6 | 2 |
| Nicole | Science – 6 | 3 |
| Ann | Social Studies – 6 | 17 |
| Eric | Social Studies – 7 | 29 |
| Maria | Science – 7 | 11 |
| Stacy | Math – 7 | 2 |
| Clarissa | Language Arts – 7 | 6 |
| Molly | Math – 8 | 11 |
| Ben | Social Studies – 8 | 3 |
| Julie | Special Education – 8 | 15 |
| Emma | Language Arts – 8 | 28 |

The three Washington Middle School teams also had a blend of experienced and relatively new teachers (see Table 2). The 12 teachers ranged in experience from 2 to 29 years, with a mean of 10.8 years of teaching experience, 8.8 years of middle school teaching experience, and 7.25 years at Washington Middle School. Much like Lincoln Middle School, each team had at least one experienced teacher who had greater than 10 years of experience.

In total, the six teams and 25 teachers included in this study had a combined 232 years of experience, with a mean of 9.3 years and a range of one to 29 years. The teachers had a mean of 7.2 years of middle school teaching experience, with 5.2 years in their respective buildings.

Data Collection and Analysis

In May 2008, researchers obtained qualitative data through interviews, structured observations of team meetings, and demographic and contextual information collected as part of a national study of the use of common planning time using the protocols developed by the Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group (Mertens, Roney, Anfa, & Caskey, 2007). At each school, data collection occurred over two days. On the first day,

the researchers individually interviewed each teacher on the selected teams. The interview questions were designed to describe the teachers’ understanding and use of common planning time. The questions were grouped into six categories: demographic information, the teacher’s understanding of common planning time, the teacher’s use of common planning time, the teacher’s professional preparation, the perceived benefits of common planning time, and the perceived barriers of common planning time. On the second day of data collection, the researchers acted as non-participant observers at each team’s regularly scheduled common planning time meeting. In all cases, the observations were of the common planning time for the interdisciplinary team, which consisted of one teacher from each of the core subject areas and, occasionally, a special education teacher. While the purpose for the structured observations was to categorize and summarize the activities and behaviors observed during common planning time (Mertens et al., 2007), the researchers used the findings of the structured observations to corroborate the findings of the teacher interviews.

Following data collection, the responses from the teacher interviews and the observations of common planning time meetings were transcribed, coded,

and analyzed for common themes expressed by the teachers during individual interviews and observed by the researchers during team common planning time sessions. In particular, the researchers sought to identify themes that would describe how each of these schools used common planning time and what characteristics made the school's use of common planning time either effective or ineffective. The researchers separately reviewed the transcribed interviews and observation notes, looking for common themes. Following the initial review, the researchers compared their results and identified three consistent themes that had been explicitly expressed by the teachers interviewed and corroborated by observations of the team common planning time sessions. The researchers conducted a second, separate review of the interview transcripts and observation notes and coded the data based on the three identified themes—vision and mission, type of planning, and leadership. When coding by the individual researchers was complete, the researchers compared their coding for consistency. In addition, the researchers checked the accuracy of their findings through member checking. To this end, each teacher interviewed and both building administrators received a copy of the findings and were asked to review them and provide feedback. The identity of the study participants remained anonymous throughout the member checking process.

Results

In each sample school, common planning time was viewed as essential to the school's success. Both schools scheduled interdisciplinary team planning, grade level planning, and professional learning communities—each with its own regularly scheduled common planning time. Interdisciplinary teams and professional learning communities were expected to meet weekly, whereas grade level teams met on an as-needed basis. Teachers at all grade levels and in all core subjects expressed the positive effects the regularly scheduled planning time had on student performance, instruction, and faculty morale. Analysis of the interview and observational data in addressing the three research questions revealed three themes to explain the effective use of common planning time by teachers in both sample schools—a common vision and mission, clearly defined goals for common planning time, and effective building level leadership. While these themes are not surprising, they reinforce both research and conventional wisdom on effective team practices.

Common Vision and Mission

First and foremost, both schools had a common vision and mission that were more than finely crafted statements posted in the school entryway. In the schools studied, the vision and mission were embraced and exemplified by all faculty and administrators. As stated on the state report card for one of the schools, “Lincoln Middle School . . . places its primary focus on student needs. This safe and nurturing environment provides a backdrop for the relationships forged between students and teachers. It is our hallmark.” During the interview sessions, teachers stated repeatedly that the primary focus in their building was the needs of the students. They indicated that common planning time afforded them the opportunity to meet the specific needs of students, and it encouraged them to select topics and activities for team meeting agendas that were directly related to students' needs. For example, Darla, a sixth grade language arts teacher with 24 years of teaching experience, responded,

I think the students benefit because, if we are talking about how to organize something, communicating about testing, or talking about our kids, I think the end goal is how it is going to benefit our students. What's the best way we can prepare them, what's the best way we can set up our testing environment, all those kinds of things—it's toward what's best for them.

Other teachers' responses confirmed this. For example, Bethany, a second-year language arts and social studies teacher at Lincoln Middle School, stated, “We're here for the common good of the kids. Whatever it takes to be the most successful to help these kids is what comes first and foremost, which is what's so great about working on this team.” Her colleague, Terri, also in her second year of teaching, added, “I think everyone in this particular school is absolutely aware that that's the goal of our school. That's from the very top down.” Stacy, a seventh grade mathematics teacher at Washington Middle School, replied, “I'd say the thing we probably talk about most is student concerns.” Observations also confirmed the central focus on students. Each of the observed team planning sessions included time for teachers to discuss individual students. In one team planning session, the teachers addressed individual students on their class rosters, highlighting the academic, behavioral, and social needs of each student.

The schools' common focus on students' academic and relationship needs enabled the faculty to identify many of the specific benefits of the common planning time that was allotted in their weekly schedules. Teachers reported a high level of morale and cohesiveness, a unified support system for students, an organized and efficient team identity and focus, and open and ongoing communication. For example, Eric, a seventh grade social studies teacher who has worked at Washington Middle School for 29 years, stated, "I think the communication is very, very strong among us, and I think because of that, it has provided safety nets for the kids, and it has been good for us." Michael, a first-year teacher, revealed, "I think the main benefit is that it adds to a family-like cohesion of the team members so that we're friendly in the hallway, more open to the sharing of ideas." These beliefs were shared by both veteran and beginning teachers.

Clearly Defined Goals for Common Planning Time

In addition to a common vision and mission, both schools organized the schedule to include three distinct types of team planning—interdisciplinary team, grade level, and professional learning communities—each with a specific function and clearly defined goals for how the common planning time was to be used, and all teachers clearly articulated the purpose for each. Interdisciplinary team planning primarily focused on individual student behavioral and academic issues, team "housekeeping" tasks (i.e., field trips, rewards, daily schedule changes), parent communication and conferences, guidance and support, and planning integrated units of instruction. According to Ashley, a seventh grade science teacher who has been teaching at Lincoln Middle School for 12 years, a typical interdisciplinary team planning session might include, "addressing adjustments in schedules, student concerns, dealing with IEP (Individualized Education Plan) issues, behavior issues, there can be prep work we need to do on a team activity, a team field trip." While priorities for teams varied from week to week, depending on the individual issues teams were addressing or the timing of the school year, student growth and behavior and teacher morale were consistently emphasized. For example, a veteran teacher of 29 years named Eric commented on the effects of common planning time on teacher morale saying, "It's a great stabilizer. It's emotional support that I didn't have before, and I've taught long enough that I've not had a common planning time. I much prefer this." Ann, another veteran teacher with 17 years' experience, added,

Since we do have four teachers on our team who see the same students, it does help us to find out if students are having difficulty in more than one subject. Perhaps they have strengths in one subject, and we're not recognizing that in our subjects. So when we're able to meet all together, we can look for the strengths and weaknesses that a child has and what they bring to the classroom. And maybe it's a behavior issue that's happening in one class, and it's not happening in another class, so what strategies are you using? Tell me a little bit about your class, your management, maybe it's the time of day, and we can make a little schedule change and have the child in a different class at a different time. It helps us meet the needs of the kids that way.

The opportunity to regularly engage in conversation and seek advice allowed teachers to stay focused on student progress, reinforcing their primary reason for being an education professional.

Grade level planning not only focused on many "housekeeping" tasks (i.e., field trips, awards programs, assemblies and special programs), but also emphasized school policies and assessment demands. In fact, observations of the use of common planning time revealed one grade level meeting focused on a potential change to the school's homework and grading policy. Ten sixth grade teachers were sharing their thoughts on the potential change and how it might impact students, highlighting the specific benefits and potential drawbacks. It was an initial conversation. Often, school-wide issues are introduced at the grade level, and then interdisciplinary teams are expected to further the discussion. Mary, a sixth grade mathematics and social studies teacher at Lincoln Middle School, commented, "You have to have everybody there. Like anything else, you've got the large group, and as you work your way down to the smaller group, you get more individualized ideas coming out." Of the three types of common planning time used, the grade level planning time takes place on an as-needed basis, often occurring less frequently than interdisciplinary team planning and professional learning communities.

Curriculum alignment, development of common assessments, and analysis of student assessment data were key functions of the professional learning community planning time. Second-year teacher, Bethany, described her professional learning community as

Best practice sharing. Sharing what we know, sharing ideas. Whether it is sharing what works, what doesn't work, planning lessons, planning assessments, scheduling—whatever it is we need to do to make sure that we can be as successful as we need to be for those students.

Through sharing their ideas, teachers were able to learn different strategies and techniques from one another that were instantly transferable. Nicholas, another second-year math teacher, noted, “A couple of times we talked about the way we presented things. . . . I taught it the way she taught it, and she taught the way I did, and it actually worked out better for both groups.” In addition, Jessica, a sixth grade language arts teacher at Washington Middle School, stated,

We go day by day. What are we teaching? What specific lessons are we teaching? We get the core content and standards out for a unit. We make sure that we go through with a checklist to make sure we've taught each core content standard. We map literally every single day, every single thing, that we are teaching.

Having the opportunity to consistently share ideas with one another, outline units, and compare assessments and student progress provided an outlet for teachers to increase the likelihood of all students receiving the most appropriate instruction.

Separating the student behavioral and academic issues and “housekeeping” functions from the curriculum and assessment functions enabled the teams to remain on task and achieve their intended goals without getting sidetracked by discussions about one or two students' behavioral issues. In all three types of common planning employed by the sample schools, teams had printed agendas and recorded minutes that were forwarded to the building level administrators, which helped the teams and professional learning communities maintain their focus. Clarissa and Nicholas, both teachers at Washington Middle School, confirmed this with comments like, “Our principal requires us to send all minutes of the team meeting to him” and “Well, they do look at our minutes. We have a specific form that we have to fill out saying what all we've done.” This was consistently highlighted throughout the interviews with teachers.

Effective Building Level Leadership

The common thread between vision and mission and the clearly defined goals for common planning time was positive, effective building level leadership. In both schools, the administrators developed a collegial, supportive climate in which high expectations, trust, and professionalism were the norm. Teachers confirmed this during interviews. “I think they allow us to use that time in the way we see that we need to,” replied Whitney, an eighth grade mathematics teacher with 12 years' experience. Mary, a 16-year veteran, responded,

We've been given the trust, and we're treated as professionals to go into these groups, and the decisions that are made . . . are taken seriously, and that way I think everybody in the building feels like they have a voice, and they do get to contribute, and what they think matters. That's very much how the administration helps us—by trusting us and treating us as the professionals that we are.

Furthermore, common planning time for interdisciplinary teams and professional learning communities was a district and building level priority, and administrators made the commitment to support common planning time through staff development, finances, consistent communication, and scheduling. As Nicholas commented, administrators “come through fairly regularly to check up on us, you know, just listen in our meetings, what we are talking about, wanting to see student samples, how we change things from one room to another.” Katelyn, a first-year special education teacher said of her principal, “He does touch in with us, and he reads the minutes, and if the minutes aren't posted, we hear about it. I know he's keeping track that way, but he's not sitting in on meetings.” In fact, even district level administrators make a commitment to the functions and purpose of common planning time. As Emma, a 28-year veteran with 18 years at Washington Middle School noted, “They often will come in and sit in our meetings, particularly our PLCs (Professional Learning Communities). In fact, on one occasion we had [the superintendent] as well as the principal sitting in on our PLC.” Without exception, the teachers who were interviewed pointed to the leadership of the building administrator as one of the key elements in establishing and maintaining a professional, supportive climate that encouraged team members to use their common planning time to meet the academic and relationship needs of the students on the team.

Conclusions

Common planning time has been a hallmark of the middle school since its inception. In *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (2010), National Middle School Association stated, “The interdisciplinary team of two or more teachers working with a common group of students in a block of time is the signature component of high-performing schools, literally the heart of the school” (p. 31). However, for the interdisciplinary team to function effectively, “Daily or regular common planning time is essential so that teams can plan ways to integrate the curriculum, analyze test data, review student work, discuss current research, and reflect on the effectiveness of instructional approaches” (p. 32). Though the middle school founders believed common planning time was essential, little evidence existed to demonstrate the effective use of common planning time. Examining the use of common planning time through teacher interviews and structured observations in two high-performing middle schools allowed the researchers to uncover several characteristics that made their common planning time effective. From this experience, several conclusions were drawn that may help other middle schools enhance their use of common planning time.

Commitment and Support at All Levels

First and foremost, for common planning time to be effective, there must be a commitment to its success at all levels of the school organization—teachers, building level administrators, and central office personnel. In the cases of Lincoln Middle School and Washington Middle School, the district central office supported and encouraged the planning time structure, particularly the professional learning communities, by providing professional development, time, and resources for their successful implementation. Central office personnel made a district-wide commitment to the professional learning community approach and the corresponding need for common planning time for the professional learning communities to function properly. This was emphasized repeatedly in the teacher interviews. When asked what their reactions would be if common planning time were eliminated by the district, teachers made comments like, “That would never happen here” or “I can’t imagine that happening.” Teachers knew that common planning time was supported by the administration at all levels.

Building level administrators also embraced common planning time and saw it as an essential component of

the school’s mission. In planning the school schedules, principals viewed common planning time as “sacred.” The common planning time was scheduled daily, and this time was to be used for grade level planning, interdisciplinary team planning, or professional learning communities. The only stipulation was that professional learning communities were required to meet one time per week. There was greater flexibility for the use of grade level and interdisciplinary team planning time. The building level administrators also demonstrated their commitment to common planning time by regularly reviewing team agendas and minutes that were submitted to the principal, commenting on the work of the teams, and occasionally visiting various team planning times to offer support, encouragement, and feedback.

Building level administrators also demonstrated their support for common planning time by establishing a school climate that allowed the common planning time to flourish. Principals clearly articulated their expectations for the use of common planning time, provided the time for the expectations to be met, and trusted the faculty to perform as professionals and fulfill their responsibilities. In turn, there was a reasonable system of accountability in place by which the principal evaluated the effectiveness of the teams. The teachers commented that the principals treated them as professionals and did not micro-manage. There was simply an expectation that the teachers would use the time they were given productively.

The teachers also supported the use of common planning time. Not only did they realize it was a district-wide and school-wide commitment, but they also saw the value in meeting regularly to discuss curriculum, assessment, student behavior, and team-building activities. Actually, most teachers stated that if their common planning time was eliminated by the district, they would still find time to meet, because it was that important to them and to the success of their students.

Defined Purpose and Expectations

In addition to support by administrators and teachers, to be effective, common planning time should have a clearly defined purpose and expectations for how the time will be used. Two common causes for the ineffective use of teaming planning time are (1) the lack of a clearly defined purpose or agenda, and (2) an effort to accomplish too many varied tasks within the scope of the time allotted. Both Lincoln Middle School and Washington Middle School addressed these issues by establishing three types of common planning time, each with its own clearly

defined purpose. Grade level planning was used to address grade-wide housekeeping issues such as field trips, award programs, and assemblies, and to discuss school policies and the coordination of state assessments. Grade level planning occurred only on an as-needed basis. Interdisciplinary team planning was designed to handle team housekeeping issues like field trips and daily schedule changes, but also to integrate instruction, communicate with parents, schedule parent conferences, discuss the performance of individual students, recommend students for remediation, discuss specific behavioral issues, and provide guidance and support to students. Most interdisciplinary teams at Lincoln Middle School and Washington Middle School met four days per week. On the other hand, the function of the professional learning community common planning time was primarily academic. Teachers used the professional learning community planning to design instruction, discuss instructional strategies, plan common assessments, and analyze student assessment data.

Regardless of the type of planning, each common planning session was guided by an agenda, and the activities of the team were recorded in the minutes. By dividing the tasks that were to be accomplished, the teams at Lincoln Middle School and Washington Middle School addressed both of the common pitfalls of ineffective use of planning time. Dividing the tasks gave each planning session a clearly defined purpose and goal for what was to be accomplished. It reduced the chances that the team would attempt to accomplish too many tasks during the time allotted by spreading the various tasks across the three types of planning.

The three-tiered common planning time structure also kept teachers from allowing the time to be dominated by a discussion about student behavior to the exclusion of planning for instruction and assessment. These issues were addressed in different planning time sessions. Behavior was addressed in interdisciplinary team planning, while the professional learning community planning time was dedicated to instruction and assessment issues. Regardless of how a school organizes the common planning time, it is essential to establish a clearly defined purpose and expectations for what is to be accomplished during the time allotted.

Focus on the Needs of Students

Finally, for common planning time to be effective, it should focus on the academic and relationship needs of the students. As stated on the Lincoln Middle School report card: “Lincoln Middle School

... places its primary focus on student needs. This safe and nurturing environment provides a backdrop for the relationships forged between students and teachers. It is our hallmark.” When interviewed, a familiar theme was heard loudly and clearly—the primary focus of common planning time, whether grade level, interdisciplinary, or professional learning community, is on the academic and relationship needs of the students. The teachers saw common planning time as the vehicle that allowed them to meet the students’ needs. In grade level planning time, the teams were able to coordinate their efforts across the grade to plan field trips and special events that would enhance their students’ school experience. The interdisciplinary teams allowed teachers to provide a guidance and support system for students who were experiencing difficulties academically or behaviorally. The professional learning communities enabled teachers to be reflective practitioners and to improve their instruction and assessment techniques to provide instruction that was relevant and engaging for the students. Though the teachers would readily admit that there were personal benefits to common planning time—improved teacher morale, a sense of collegiality, heightened levels of professionalism—these were all secondary to the needs of the students on the team. By focusing on the students’ needs, the personal benefits for them were enhanced.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Though the findings of this study highlight multiple factors that can enhance the effective use of common planning time, it is important to acknowledge several limitations. As previously stated, the researchers purposefully selected the two sample schools because of their recognition as *Kentucky Schools to Watch*. Schools with this designation are recognized for having organizational structures in place that support an effective middle school program. The assumption could be made that the use of common planning time observed in these schools would demonstrate more effective practice than a randomly selected middle school. In addition, teacher participants in this study were selected by the building principal, potentially increasing the chance of a biased sample by selecting the teaching teams that function more effectively. The researchers chose to accept these limitations in order to interview and observe in a setting in which the likelihood of effective use of common planning time would be observed, thus allowing the researcher to identify the factors and characteristics that enhance common planning time effectiveness.

To add to the knowledge base on the effective use of common planning time, the researchers offer several thoughts to guide future research. Whenever a case study approach is used to study a particular phenomenon, it is important that the study be replicated to enhance the validity of its interpretation and reliability of its results. The researchers encourage others to replicate this study in other high-performing middle schools, possibly other *Schools to Watch*, to see if common elements of effective common planning time use are present and to identify other elements of effective common planning time practices that were not uncovered in this study. In addition, the study should be replicated in a variety of settings with different demographics and levels of academic performance to allow for comparison of the results and to examine other common planning time organizational structures that have been effectively implemented.

Though not highlighted in this study, the teachers at Lincoln Middle School and Washington Middle School had, on average, 7.2 years of middle school teaching experience and had taught in their respective buildings for 5.2 years. These figures indicate the faculty was relatively “young” in terms of their professional lives. Future research should examine the impact of teacher experience and training on the effective use of common planning time. By having a professionally “young” faculty, were principals better able to implement the current planning time structure? Were the teachers in these buildings ones who had been trained in the middle school concept during their professional preparation and had embraced it, thus making the implementation of common planning time more effective? Or, does the relative professional youth of the faculty indicate that the building level leadership had actively and successfully compiled a staff that would embrace the mission of the school, resulting in the effective use of common planning time? These issues and others would enhance the understanding of common planning time and allow its benefits to be realized by other middle schools seeking to use common planning time effectively.

This research is part of the National Middle Grades Research Project (NMGRP) focusing on common planning time. The NMGRP was developed by the Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author(s).

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