



Turning Points

TRANSFORMING MIDDLE SCHOOLS

School Structures that Support
Learning and Collaboration





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Introduction

Three years ago, as a result of the Turning Points Data-Based Inquiry and Decision Making Process, the faculty of Smith Middle School identified the need to improve student-teacher relationships as a key challenge area. A study group was formed to identify ways in which Smith teachers could address this dilemma. As one teacher put it, “How can I get to know each student when I meet with more than 120 students a day? They’re in and out of my room so fast that I barely have time to say hello, let alone get to know each student’s learning needs.” Reducing student-teacher ratios seemed a necessary response to this challenge.

The study group quickly found, however, that discussions about reducing the number of students a teacher met with each day led to exploring the master schedule, which in turn led to a broad-based examination of many of the school’s structures and underlying assumptions about schooling and learning.

“If we want to know our students better, how else can we achieve this, besides just adding more teachers?” asked one teacher. “Do we have to find one single structure to work for everyone? Is there a way to create flexibility so that we can continually adjust to the needs of our teachers and students?” asked another. Questions about the schedule and student-teacher ratio led to conversations about how Smith groups its students, what subjects teachers should and are willing to teach, and how long class periods should be. All this talk of structures inevitably led to a review of the school’s underlying beliefs about learning and schooling. Clearly, responding to this challenge area would not be a simple task.

After a semester of exploration, the study group proposed a series of changes to be implemented over the next two years. Smith Middle School would reorganize into two-person teacher teams with each team responsible for no more than 50 students. One person on the team would teach Humanities (English and Social Studies) and the other Math and Science. Each two-person team would have two common planning periods scheduled per week along with two additional periods per week to meet with the entire grade level team. In order for teacher teams to configure their time to meet the school's learning goals and allow for ample common planning time, they'd create a flexible block schedule. The proposed changes involved not only logistical modifications, but also a shift in how the school supports teachers.

The study group knew that the biggest challenges to implementing the changes would be to make sure that everyone understood the underlying purpose for the changes and to make sure that teachers felt supported throughout the transition. The study group presented survey and statistical data to the full faculty and at parent forums and circulated articles on related topics. The study group organized faculty visits to three schools that used the two-person team model effectively, enabling the school community to join them in exploration before making a final decision. Students were also involved. They participated in a town hall meeting, in which the study group hosted an “open mic” session with students and then conducted a closed ballot “straw poll” vote to further inform the decision-making process. By the time the full faculty met to vote on the changes, all members had been well informed and involved in the process. There was overwhelming consensus that Smith Middle School should move to two-person teacher teams.

Why Examine School Structures?

The structures that guide a school community through its day-to-day operations—its master schedules, the length and frequency of class periods, how students and teachers are grouped, and how financial resources are allocated—reflect the beliefs and values of the school. If a school believes that all students learn in the same way and at the same pace, then traditional structures, in which all students attend classes for 42-minute periods and sit in rows to listen to teacher lectures, might make sense. However, when a school recognizes that

students learn in different ways and wants to provide learning opportunities so that all students will succeed, traditional school structures need to be reexamined. Re-examining school structures should be undertaken with the goal of promoting greater equity of access to rigorous learning opportunities so that all students can achieve at high levels.

Turning Points schools evaluate existing school structures to make sure they support the school community's vision about what it wants for its students. Are students grouped heterogeneously, allowing access to rigorous learning opportunities for all students? Do students from diverse backgrounds have opportunity to learn from each other? Do teachers have enough common planning time and other resources to create a curriculum that helps students develop habits of mind and the skills of intellectual inquiry? Do students and teachers have long enough blocks of time to engage in authentic, intellectual work? Are the budget decisions based upon a school's learning goals? By consciously aligning organizational structures with the underlying beliefs about students and schools, Turning Points schools foster higher student achievement and a positive collaborative culture among students and teachers alike.

School Structures include:

Creating Small Learning Communities

Grouping Students for Learning

Promoting Personalized and Caring Relationships Between Adults and Students

Using Time to Support Learning

Allocating Resources

QUESTIONS FOR SCHOOL COMMUNITIES TO ASK AS THEY REEXAMINE STRUCTURES

- What structures allow teachers to know their students well in a personalized and caring learning environment?
- What structures encourage students and teachers to be engaged in authentic, meaningful work?
- What structures encourage collaboration and reflection among colleagues to improve their practice and student learning?
- What structures connect students to the school and maximize the strengths of the faculty?

Turning Points schools are grounded in the belief that creating a culture of authentic learning in small, democratic communities is essential to improved student performance and achievement. A growing body of research indicates that “students and teachers should, upon entering the middle grades school, join a small, ethical community in which adolescents and adults get to know each other well and so create a climate of intellectual development and a community of shared educational purpose” (Jackson and Davis 2000). Another compelling argument for building strong communities of learners reflects the broader needs of society. In our new global society, “the ability to think abstractly, the ability to solve real, complex problems, and the ability to communicate and work well with others are the skills that will power modern economies for the foreseeable future” (Marshall and Tucker 1992). The middle level child needs a caring learning community that challenges her/him appropriately. Such a school culture has structures in place that meet the needs of students, teachers, and, consequently, society at large.

The Interconnectedness of School Structures

Schedules, student groupings, and allocation of resources are often the most entrenched aspects of a learning community. They form a complex weave of interconnected elements. Making one change can quickly affect the school’s entire foundation. For example, when a school decides to have its eighth grade students present cumulative portfolios as part of their graduation requirement, it may find itself redesigning the master schedule so that teachers have more advisory time with their students to help them develop their portfolios. For structural change to be effective, schools need to take into account all the factors involved in making the change rather than proceed in a piecemeal fashion.

This interconnectedness can be viewed as a strength because it allows schools to function as one unified system. A unified system enables educators to recognize patterns and develop continuity among a myriad of projects and initiatives. However, for some the complexity can be overwhelming, causing a reluctance to change anything for fear of disrupting the whole system. Careful planning to ensure that the whole school community is informed and involved is critical to successful improvement.

Structures alone do not improve a school or student achievement.

For any change to be made within a school, such as improving student achievement or developing a collaborative culture among colleagues, educators often look first at the school's structures. Structures alone, however, do not improve a school or student achievement. Rather, they create the conditions for more effective teaching and learning. While some may think that changing the schedule is easier than changing the underlying beliefs or norms that cause the school to function as it does, a combination of factors is usually at work when a school shows real and lasting improvement. Real improvements can be seen only when a structural change includes a clearly defined mission to improve student learning, a faculty that has ownership of the process and is committed to developing a deeper understanding of teaching and learning, and resources are allocated to support change (Ames and Miller 1994).

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES FOR STRUCTURING TURNING POINTS SCHOOLS

Create Small Learning Communities



Organize large schools into small learning communities called “academies.” When a school is so large that even a small team of teachers sharing a common set of students feels insufficient, schools often look for additional ways to help create the sense of a small and caring learning community. Breaking a large school down into smaller, semiautonomous units called “academies” can provide support for teams of teachers and students.



Organize teachers and students into academic teams with no more than 50–100 students per teacher. Teachers are organized into small interdisciplinary teams of two to four people sharing a common group of no more than 50–100 students. Common planning time is created for teacher teams to engage in discussions about teaching and learning.

Group Students for Learning



Explore options such as looping and multi-grade grouping. Looping refers to the practice of teaching the same students for more than one year. With multi-grade grouping, students of more than one grade are together in a class. The practices of looping and multi-

grade grouping can increase opportunities for building stronger teacher-student relationships and addressing the learning needs of all students.



Group students flexibly for learning. Students are placed in heterogeneous learning groups in order to hold all students to rigorous academic standards and to allow teachers to build on students' different learning styles and needs. These groupings are flexible, allowing students to be in different groups for different learning experiences and purposes.

Use Time to Support Learning



Create school schedules that allow for flexibility, longer blocks of learning, and common planning time. Flexible block scheduling allows teacher teams to configure their time as needed to meet their learning goals. Longer blocks of learning exist to accommodate in-depth inquiry and varied instructional strategies. Teacher teams have long blocks of time for planning and curriculum development.

Promote Personalized Caring Relationships Between Adults and Students



Establish programs to promote personalized, caring relationships between adults and students, including advisory and mentoring programs. One of the most important ways to ensure student success in middle schools is for each student to have a close, personal relationship with at least one adult in the school. Advisory and mentoring programs provide opportunities for adults and students to build strong relationships through discussions and activities related to the developmental and social, as well as academic, needs of young adolescents.

Allocate Resources To Support Learning



Allocate resources to support the school's learning goals. Decisions on how to allocate school and district resources, including funding for professional development, teaching staff, and release time, are based on a school-wide comprehensive plan developed with the consensus of the faculty. Professional development is largely school-based and rooted in real conversations about the daily practices of learning and teaching.

Getting Started: The Data-Based Inquiry and Decision Making Process

As the Benjamin Franklin Middle School engaged in the Data-based Inquiry and Decision Making process they used both the Turning Points Benchmarks and the Self-study Survey to assess their school's progress. They agreed that the small communities of learners described in the benchmarks didn't exist in their school. They then referred to their Self-study Survey and noticed that their students reported feeling isolated and alienated from the teaching staff. To look further into this issue, the staff decided to form a study group. After several meetings, the study group brought a proposal to the full faculty recommending that next year's school schedule be reconfigured to allow for small teams of teachers and students.

Changing the way a school is structured calls for schools to engage in a process of reflecting and assessing, prioritizing and planning, acting and reevaluating. While Turning Points schools engage in this process on a continuous basis, beginning a process of change should grow from a clear vision and with a set of deliberate and careful steps. Change is usually controversial. Resistance from teachers, parents and community groups, contract issues with the teachers' union, and state regulations for teacher certification may all present obstacles to the change process and must be addressed. A democratic process and keeping a clear focus on how any change is connected to a school's underlying principles will help schools see their options more clearly and maintain a sense of mission through what may be a long and difficult process.

Turning Points schools use a process for change called Data-Based Inquiry and Decision Making (See the Turning Points *Guide to Data-Based Inquiry and Decision Making*) to find ways to improve their schools.

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FACTORS INVOLVED IN MAKING EFFECTIVE STRUCTURAL CHANGES

- **Vision:** A clear vision guides the change process
- **Concrete outcomes:** Concrete outcomes are identified for how changes will improve teaching and learning
- **Systems Perspective:** Individual changes are seen as part of a larger whole
- **Shared Leadership:** Principals and other school leaders share information and power necessary to make decisions and enact changes with teachers and other members of the school community
- **Consensus:** There is faculty consensus in which most members support the decision and all members can at least live with the decision
- **Communication:** There is effective and open communication among faculty, parents, students, and community that results in active support for change
- **Data-based Decision Making:** Decisions are based on relevant research and information and are shared with the school community
- **Professional Development:** Sufficient professional development time and resources are allocated to help teachers make a transition to the new structure and take advantage of new teaching opportunities afforded by the change
- **Time:** There is a reasonable timeframe for implementing the change



Creating Small Learning Communities

When the local Shakespeare Repertory Theatre (SRT) approached Milltown Middle School about working with 300 of Milltown's 900 students, Bridge Academy, one of the three academies within the school, leapt at the chance. Bridge Academy faculty knew that an academy-wide project would be a powerful means for unifying the students across grade levels and helping to shape its identity.

Bridge Academy held a community meeting with all its students so that SRT could explain their proposal for working with the students. The excitement among students was clear; they asked questions about set building, auditions, and costumes, while teachers joined in to explain why they thought it would be a great opportunity. After the community meeting, teachers talked to their classes to gauge their interest. The students were enthusiastic.

Once it was decided among the academy faculty to invite SRT to work with Bridge Academy, they had to address both logistical and programmatic issues. Bridge Academy team leaders met to adjust the master schedule so that they could accommodate the ten-week interdisciplinary project. They used their flexible block schedule to arrange time for research, rehearsal, and set building. They adjusted the teams' common planning time so that they could not only meet with their individual teams, but also with their subject-area groups and project committees.

As an autonomous structure, Bridge Academy had control over its master schedule, making it possible for SRT to work with Bridge Academy's 300 students. Without the academy structure, the program would not have been feasible, causing too much disruption to the entire school's master schedule.

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Academies

An academy is a semiautonomous grouping of students and teachers within a large school. There is wide agreement among researchers, educators, and parents that smaller is better when it comes to school size, especially for low-income students and students of color. Small schools have demonstrated better student achievement, attendance, and engagement, and fewer safety and discipline problems than larger schools (Muncey and McQuillan 1991). Larger schools are at a distinct disadvantage for knowing their students well and creating the caring, flexible structures that support students' needs. The academy structure is important for helping to create opportunities for students and teachers to form close bonds, as well as for students to build a sense of identity, ownership, and community.

While there are many different ways to group students and teachers into academies, “vertical” grouping may be the most advantageous. Since the ideal middle school is 200–400 students, innovative educators have responded to larger schools by creating small learning environments without building new buildings and establishing new bureaucracies. In a vertical academy structure, students remain in the same academy for their entire tenure in the middle school. For instance, a traditional school of 1200 students may break down into four academies, each with 300 students divided into three or four grade level teams of 75–100 students each.

Vertical academies help a large school achieve small learning communities because they create consistency of staff across grade levels, further enabling teachers to know students well. It may also foster a greater consistency and coherence in addressing school-wide learning standards and competencies because a small group of teachers is responsible for interpreting them to align with the unique characteristics and interests of the academy. So, while all students in a school may be required to complete a graduation exhibition, students in one academy may complete portfolios and another academy may have students perform a comprehensive individual project.

Breaking a large school into smaller, semiautonomous groups of 200–400 students can provide dedicated support for teams of students and teachers, as academies have a certain degree of autonomy over their program. Most maintain control over at least a portion of their own budget, staffing, curriculum, organization, and scheduling.

BENEFITS OF THE ACADEMY STRUCTURE



Knowing students well: The notion that teachers should know their students well extends beyond the individual team or classroom in an academy. Having a consistent group of teachers know all the students in an academy throughout a student's tenure at the middle school enables students to feel a part of a learning community over multiple years. Communication across grade level teachers is increased in an academy, because a sixth teacher team may only have to communicate with one seventh grade team, as all the students advance together to that team.



The young adolescent's sense of identity: Group identity is an important factor in early adolescent development, and being part of a positive group with a strong identity helps middle school students form their own sense of identity. As well, academies allow for cross-age interactions, important for middle schoolers, as their need for mentors and role models is high. By incorporating a range of ages, academies enrich the diversity of the community while maintaining the intimacy of a small learning environment.



Shared leadership and decision-making: In a very large school, teacher teams can feel isolated in the same way that students do. Academies can join groups of teams together so they have a stronger voice when advocating for their needs and feel greater support from their colleagues. Academies can arrange schedules as needed, hire and rearrange staff, and allocate resources at their discretion. It is easier to work with outside agencies and to develop initiatives within an academy because of the flexibility afforded in the semiautonomous structure. In short, academies afford team teachers more access to leadership and shared decision-making.



The teacher's role: Large schools typically come with large numbers of support staff, large bureaucracies, and a high degree of task specialization among adults, creating a sea of adults for students, parents, and others to navigate. By creating academies, teachers play a broader role in the lives of their students and in the life of the school. Teachers take on more decision-making and leadership roles, thus lowering the number of adults and staff with whom students and parents interact. As teachers move from being subject area specialists to

generalists with expertise in many areas, they are more inclined to not only see themselves as leaders and decision-makers, but also as care-takers of young adolescents, not just teachers of a subject. As teachers take on community responsibilities within the academy, their leadership reaches beyond their isolated classroom and fosters a new level of professionalism, commitment, and empowerment.

As with any structural feature of a school, it is only as effective as the culture of the school allows it to be. Reorganizing schools into academies alone does not ensure the type of learning and teaching environment that contributes to student success and teacher satisfaction. A school that successfully implements academies does so with a firm set of guidelines in place (Raywind 1996).

GUIDELINES FOR IMPLEMENTING ACADEMIES

- **Academy membership:** Academies have 200–300 students representing the total diversity of the school, with representation from all grades. Students remain in the same academy for as long as they are enrolled in the school.
- **Equity among academies:** There is fair and equal distribution of resources among academies within a school, including staff and space.
- **Student diversity within academies:** Student diversity regarding income status, race, gender, and academic achievement is equitably maintained within each academy. This can be accomplished either by lottery or student choice, by which balanced enrollment is ensured.
- **Teacher choice in academy membership:** Teachers need to be able to have input into selecting which academy they want to join, while balancing the need to create equitable distribution of faculty strengths and talent among academies. Creating a community of like-minded professionals who share a common educational philosophy not only facilitates its efficiency, but also adds to the sense of belonging and empowerment that an academy can foster.
- **Autonomy of academies:** Each academy is semi-autonomous, having control over hiring, scheduling, and allocation of resources. Academies within a school share with one another use of facilities, a common vision, shared expectations for learning standards, and principal leadership that can advocate for the school at the district level.

Academic Teams

Before Harrison Middle School moved to two-person academic teams, Mr. Lang was a social studies teacher who met with five groups of students for forty-five minutes each day. He was always frustrated that he didn't have enough time with his students to thoroughly engage them with a topic. He felt as if nothing was "sticking." Students left his classroom without making meaningful connections with the material he presented.

With a new teaming structure in place at Harrison, Mr. Lang began teaching an integrated language arts and social studies program, meeting with each of his groups during a ninety minute block each day. He decided to develop and expand a social studies unit he had taught before on the topic of justice and dissent during the Civil Rights era. Using the Turning Points model for curriculum development, he started with the essential question, "What is courage?" as a focus for the unit.

Mr. Lang worked with the school's language arts team to identify language arts learning goals for the unit. From these he selected a set of skills that would be easily reinforced in both language arts and social studies. He chose skills related to persuasive writing, public speaking, and character analysis.

During the unit, students explored both historical and literary figures of the Civil Rights era, looking for examples of courage. For the culminating assessment, students adopted a historical or literary persona they had studied and made a presentation to the class as that person. By integrating the two subjects into one thematic focus, students were able to create important intellectual connections between the literature they read, the essays they wrote, and important social studies concepts they discussed. In identifying a set of skills and goals that crossed disciplines, Mr. Lang created opportunities for students to develop those skills in a variety of subjects and in much greater depth.

Teachers working together in teams is an essential element of Turning Points schools, no matter which aspect of the comprehensive vision a school chooses to focus on implementing first. Academic teams are particularly important to improving teaching and learning. Academic Teams consist of two to six teachers who teach and are responsible for a common group of students. When combined with flexible block

Teaming is an essential element of Turning Points schools.

scheduling and ample common planning time for teachers, teaming can help improve student learning by giving students and teachers the opportunity to work more closely together on in-depth learning experiences (Mansfield 1999). With teaming, teachers work with fewer students for longer blocks of time, allowing time for such practices as conferences, workshops, and providing oral and written feedback that assist student learning. While subject area teams, such as Language Arts, Math, Science and Social Studies are important for aligning curriculum to standards and developing a sequential curriculum within a discipline, academic teams foster connections across disciplines. They allow students to make important interdisciplinary connections and teachers to know their students better because of the collaboration that can happen among team teachers.

(For more information on Academic Teams, see the *Turning Points Guide to Collaborative Culture and Shared Leadership*.)

BENEFITS OF ACADEMIC TEAMS



Knowing students well: When teachers share the same students, they come to know their students well. This knowledge promotes increased learning through sustained contact, greater personalized connections, and fewer disciplinary interruptions (*Turning Points* 1989). During team meetings and common planning time, teachers share knowledge about individual students and their learning experiences. Focused and reflective discussion often leads teachers to see students' different strengths and interests, as well as their areas of need, both academically and personally.



Improving student learning: Teaming allows teachers to coordinate their curriculum across the disciplines. As students make intellectual connections among the different subjects and engage in meaningful experiences, their learning increases. The *Turning Points* model for curriculum development uses guiding questions, or “essential questions,” to focus student learning on a theme or general concept that can be explored in depth across disciplines. Learning goals focused around habits of mind and skills, and assessments and culminating projects are all important curricular elements that can forge interdisciplinary connections.

(For more information on developing curriculum, see the *Turning Points Guide to Curriculum Development*.)



Professional growth of teachers: Teaming promotes professional growth among teachers through creating shared expectations, common planning time, collaboration, critique, reflection, and support. Teaming provides a stimulating and supportive learning environment for teachers that enhances their ability to improve their teaching skills and broaden their scope of teaching strategies.



Scheduling flexibility: Teaming affords teachers the flexibility to create schedules that support rather than direct learning goals and teaching strategies. In a fragmented schedule, students are forced into learning patterns directed by the time permitted, rather than by the task. When a team of teachers has control over an extended block of time, they can make decisions about the use of time based on their multiple learning goals and diverse students' needs.



Broadened decision-making/leadership base: Teaming is often a catalyst for broader change efforts in a school. Because teachers have the opportunity to talk and plan together, ideas often emerge that can benefit the whole school. Teachers who advocate for changes as a group often have more confidence as well as greater impact on the direction a school takes.

Another way that leadership and decision-making is spread throughout a school is through the formal and informal structures inherent to teaming. Effective teaming requires good group process skills. Effective facilitation of meetings and group activities is essential to successful teaming. Most schools require each team to have a team leader. Team leaders are often a representative voice to the larger school community. Some schools establish their Leadership Team with team leaders; others provide support and professional development for team leaders.

GUIDELINES FOR CREATING AND SUPPORTING TEAMS



Building understanding and support: Like any school structure, teaming needs to be instituted through a process of discussion, reflection, and assessment. Moving from a traditional department structure to a team structure requires that a school reflect on and assess not only how it groups its students, but also its teaching practices and approaches to curriculum development. There must be a

There must be a clear vision established for how teaming benefits the school community.

clear vision established for how teaming benefits the community—teachers, students, and parents alike. Many schools create forums to discuss and explore the nuances of teaming, the benefits and concerns associated with it, as well as some of the logistical challenges they will face as they begin to institute teams. During this period, it is essential that the school community look beyond its knowledge and experience base to consult the relevant data and research. Once consensus is reached to adopt a school-wide team structure, a reasonable timeline should be established. Most school faculties will have a range of commitment to and experience with teaming. Allowing time for professional development, as well as on-going reflection and conversation, is essential to building the critical mass of support that a school must have when it first creates its teams.

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Identifying teams: How teachers are organized into teams is an important consideration in forming teams. There are advantages both to assigning teachers to teams and to allowing teachers to choose and form their own teams. Some teachers are uncomfortable with self-selecting teams and prefer to be assigned to a team. By assigning teams, administrators can reduce the tensions and competition that may arise from teachers feeling left out or certain teachers rising as “stars.” Administrators can ensure an equal distribution of faculty strengths and talents among all teams. On the other hand, by forming their own teams, teachers can build on collegial relationships that may already exist. Communication and collaboration can be stronger on teams that have formed natural bonds and that share common values and approaches to their students and to teaching. In either case, the decision-making process should be inclusive and transparent so that trust is not compromised. If administration is responsible for assigning teams, there should be an opportunity for teachers to give input before any final decisions are made.

■

Scheduling and use of common planning time: When any school decides to move toward a team structure, it must not only consider teachers sharing a common set of students, but also common planning time. There is little sense in creating teams of students if the teachers are not given the opportunity to practice teaming as well. During this time, teachers’ discussions should be focused on improving teaching and learning. While it is easy to use this time to talk about logistics such as the next school dance, the lack of necessary

resources for teaching, or student discipline problems, common planning time is correlated to improved student achievement only when the conversation is focused on teaching and learning (Felner et al 1994). Effective use of common planning time is one of the richest sources of on-going professional development for teachers. Common planning time, with structured agendas and facilitation, is a fundamental component of the Turning Points design. Common topics include:

- Looking at student and teacher work
- Interdisciplinary curriculum planning
- Planning for student exhibitions
- Student/parent/teacher conferences
- Meeting with guidance counselors and/or special educators
- Team-wide issues (e.g., coordinating projects, assessment, homework and event schedules, community values, norms and behaviors)

(For helpful tools to use during team meetings, see the Turning Points *Guide to Looking Collaboratively at Student and Teacher Work.*)

■ **Creating the master schedule:** One of the great benefits of teaming is the ability of teams to control longer blocks of learning time. When teams are established, it is important to create a master schedule that provides each team with extended blocks of learning time. Teams are then given the opportunity and responsibility to configure their learning block flexibly according to their learning goals and students' needs.

■ **Team configuration:** Academic teams generally include two to six teachers who share a common set of students. Teams usually include the core subjects, but they may also include specialty subjects, a guidance counselor, or a special educator. While in a four-person team, each teacher typically teaches one subject and has a student

load of 80–100 students, in a two-person team, each teacher teaches two subjects and has a student load of 40–50 students. Two-person teams afford longer blocks of learning time and a lower student-teacher ratio.



Assigning team leadership, governance, and administrative roles:

Many schools will require each team to designate a team leader, a well-organized and skilled facilitator who can shepherd the teaming process. The role of team leader or facilitator may be a voluntary position that rotates among team members, or one person may take it on as a more permanent role. How this person is designated varies from school to school. By allowing the team to choose and rotate its facilitator, good facilitation and organizational skills can be developed among all members. This egalitarian approach further fosters shared decision-making, teacher empowerment, and leadership development. In some schools, however, the principal, or team members, may choose to designate team facilitators who have proven skills and whom they feel can best move the group forward. Either way, having a team leader who fosters a professional, collaborative culture and a focus on teaching and learning among the team members is essential. The team leader's responsibilities include developing the agenda with the team, distributing meeting agendas, running the meetings, making sure all team members' voices are heard, keeping the meeting focused, and allowing time for reflection at the end of meetings.

(For more information on roles of team members, see the *Turning Points Guide to Collaborative Culture and Shared Leadership*.)



Maintaining team stability and interpersonal relationships: How long a team stays together is another decision schools face. Research has found that the longer a team stays together, the more impact it can make on student learning (Felner et al 1994). Clearly, a well-functioning team that has been together a number of years has a rich collaboration that impacts positively on student learning and achievement. Over time, a team develops their skill in effective teaming practices. A team is able to fine tune and further broaden their integrated curriculum, they have time to develop trust and communication skills that are so necessary to looking at student and teacher work, and they have developed effective systems for communicating with parents and maintaining consistency in disciplinary measures.



Integrating specialty subject areas: One of the biggest challenges schools face as they move to teaming structures is how to integrate what are commonly referred to as the “specialty subjects”—art, foreign languages, health, music, and physical education—in meaningful ways. Communication with specialty subject teachers is of paramount importance. Too often, academic team members meet while their colleagues in these specialty subjects are teaching their students, leaving those teachers feeling isolated and “out of the loop.” In addition, specialty subject teachers often have a greater student load than the “core” subject area teachers, creating a culture of inequity in the school. Some schools have partially addressed the challenge by rotating team meeting times so that at least one specialty teacher can be present at each meeting. Others rotate specialty teacher membership on a team each term, thus enabling curriculum to be more integrated and holistic as well as creating a space for collaboration among teachers. All team meeting minutes, agendas, and other materials should be distributed regularly to specialty teachers with an agreed upon system for giving and responding to feedback.

When a Turning Points school sets a vision of what it wants students to know and be able to do upon exiting the school, it must seek ways to support that vision through flexible scheduling and team membership for specialty teachers. This vision must include, and therefore, value, building proficiency in a language other than English, gaining skills and knowledge in the arts, and developing healthy bodies and minds. When a comprehensive vision is created, the divisionary lines between “core” and “specialty” subjects that cause inequities of resource allocation and devaluation of specialty subjects begin to blur. Students then begin to have learning experiences that are truly interdisciplinary.

THE UNIQUE ADVANTAGES OF TWO-PERSON TEAMS

Creating two- to six-person academic teams is supported by the Turning Points practices of knowing students well, providing professional development for teachers, broadening the decision making and leadership base, developing interdisciplinary curriculum, and creating flexible schedules. Two-person teams, however, have unique advantages that make this option particularly attractive to the middle school setting.

■ **Longer and more flexible learning blocks:** Two-person teams gain longer and more flexible blocks of learning time. Rather than seeing 80 students each day in 40–60 minute learning blocks, a two-person team teacher will see 40–50 students for 80–120 minutes each day. The primary advantage of this increased time block is that it allows for greater integration of curriculum, creating continuity and focus. It also allows students more time on task and teachers more flexibility in the types of learning experiences they structure. While a short learning block may be appropriate for a session on note taking or test taking, a longer learning block may be helpful to students who are rehearsing a play, planning a service project, staging a debate, conducting a lab experiment, or creating a geometric model.

■ **Reduced student load:** Teachers in two-person teams have a student load roughly one half the size of a teacher teaching a single subject in a larger team. When a teacher chooses to teach both language arts and social studies, or math and science, for example, she is responsible for fewer students, thus increasing her opportunity to know her students well and become fully aware of their academic and personal strengths, needs, and learning styles. With fewer students, teachers are able to increase the amount of time they spend giving feedback to their students, both written and verbal.

■ **Interdisciplinary curriculum:** Working in two-person teams gives teachers opportunities for greater integration of curriculum. When a teacher is teaching two subjects in a longer block of learning time, she can join the subjects in a way that creates a relevant and coherent curriculum. By developing a thematic approach to curriculum development, teachers identify themes that cross disciplines. With this approach, students are able to make intellectual connections between the different disciplines. This is particularly important for middle school students because they are developmentally poised to use such higher-order thinking skills (*Turning Points* 1989).

■ **Parent communication:** Communicating with fewer teachers is easier for parents and promotes better relationships between parents and teachers. Similarly, when teachers have fewer parents to communicate with, they are more likely to make contact on a regular basis.

CHALLENGES OF TWO-PERSON TEAMS



Teacher training: One common challenge for schools transitioning from a subject-area focus to a two-person team is that staff typically have been trained and hired as subject matter specialists. They may not have the appropriate expertise and up-to-date knowledge in both subject areas. This requires schools to provide the necessary staff development support for teachers to acquire relevant skills and knowledge in both subject areas.



Students want to know more peers: While not generally a concern, students can be disappointed by not having the chance to get to know as many students as they might on a larger team. Young adolescents are acutely aware of their social context and may desire to be a part of a larger social group than a small team offers. While this is a consideration, most advocates of smaller teams believe the benefits far outweigh this particular disadvantage. A gradual broadening of their social context benefits young adolescents more than an abrupt and severe shift from the 20 or so peers an elementary student encounters to the 200 or more in high school. Students also have opportunities to meet with more students through specialty subjects, advisories, extra-curricular activities, and special projects.

SAMPLE TWO- AND FOUR-PERSON ACADEMIC TEAMS

TYPE OF TEAM	TEACHERS ON THE TEAM	NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN TEACHER LOAD	ADVANTAGES	CHALLENGES	COMMENTS
TWO-PERSON	1 language arts/ social studies 1 math/science teacher	No more than 50 students	Reduced student load Better commu- nication with parents Increased student time on task Flexible learning blocks Interdiscipli- nary curriculum development	Professional development for teachers Students want to know more kids	Include spe- cialty subject area teachers by rotating meeting schedules, or assigning specialty teachers to teams by term Maintain clear lines of communication between teacher teams and specialty teachers
FOUR- PERSON	1 language arts 1 social studies 1 math 1 science	No more than 100 students	Better commu- nication with parents Interdiscipli- nary curriculum development Flexible learning blocks Interdiscipli- nary curriculum development	Large numbers of students per teacher Interdiscipli- nary curriculum connections and develop- ment	