

## Middle E-Connections

### Power Up with Powerful Teaming

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"So, do you really want to tackle the reading comprehension problems your students are experiencing or just continue to complain about it?" Our team looked at one another—our bluff had been called!" These words were the opening salvo of a thought-provoking presentation at a National Middle School Association annual conference. This middle grades team went on to share their approach to cross-curriculum reading instruction and the results they achieved.

It was an uncomplicated plan:

- Identify seven or eight key reading skills shown to increase comprehension.
- Plot out a yearlong approach identifying when and by whom each specific skill would be introduced and who would reinforce that skill.

For example, teaching students to read a text organized in a compare/contrast format might be introduced in science class in October and then reinforced in social studies in November and in language arts in December. It was a simple, elegant plan that got results—those all-important test scores improved.

That presentation was an "aha" moment for me. It got me thinking more deeply about additional ways team teachers can support student learning in each other's discipline areas.

We've known for years that teaming is an effective practice in middle grades schools. Nancy Flowers reported in the November 2000 *Middle School Journal* that "coordinated efforts of interdisciplinary teams and the implementation of practices in the classroom are linked, suggesting that one influences the other." She went on to say, "It is now evident that classroom instructional practices are positively related to student achievement gains."

In addition, a 2003 research brief from The Principal Partnership discussed the effectiveness of working together as a team: "The key factor for positively increasing student achievement through teaming seems to be the extent to which the team uses the team structure to focus on learning activities" (<http://www.principalspartnership.com/library.html>).

There are multiple ways teams can leverage their structure to unleash the learning potential in students.

- Teach the skills of collaboration in a systematic way that allows students to practice these skills in multiple contexts. Read *Productive Group Work* by Frey, Fisher, and Everlove for the latest research on this topic.
- Devise a coordinated approach to literacy, similar to one described above.
- Close the vocabulary gap of your students by addressing together academic words that cut across all disciplines and content-specific words. Read the research (<http://www.nmsa.org/Research/ResearchSummaries/VocabularyTeaching/tabid/1728/Default.aspx>).
- Introduce students to the intricacies of information literacy in all classes by incorporating 21st century research that includes evaluating websites, learning the nuances of correct citation, and synthesizing information from multiple sources. Visit November Learning (<http://novemberlearning.com/resources/information-literacy-resources/>).
- Help students develop the skills of creative and effective communication beyond PowerPoints and essays. Go to <http://www.jasonohler.com/storytelling/index.cfm> to learn about digital storytelling.
- Help students build 21st century organization competencies. Explore ([http://www.p21.org/route21/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=11&Itemid=11](http://www.p21.org/route21/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=11&Itemid=11)).
- Experiment with project-based learning units that cut across curriculum areas and help your students meet standards. Edutopia has great resources (<http://www.edutopia.org/project-based-learning>).

Teams improve student learning and achievement when they work together strategically to address the skills, knowledge, and processes that span the curriculum.

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