

# Vertical Teaming

## Making Connections Across Levels

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*Penny H. Kowal*

*"It's not the social part or the lunchroom or the time between classes I'm worried about."*

It's the teachers and the work," one rising high schooler shared recently.

We strive to provide an emotionally supportive environment for our students as they make the transition between elementary, middle, and high school, but we sometimes forget that we can also provide a supportive academic transition as well. The key is cooperation, communication, and teamwork.

Teamwork is a mainstay in middle schools, where teachers work closely to create an atmosphere of support for students and a sense of cohesion across the middle level curriculum.

When we think of teaming, we most often think of horizontal teams within the middle school. Of equal value, however, is the vertical team, which reaches beyond the middle school walls, promoting teamwork among elementary, middle, and high school educators.

A vertical team is a group of educators (teachers, counselors, administrators) from different grade levels who work together to develop a curriculum that provides a seamless transition from grade to grade. It's all about scope and sequence—linking elementary curriculum with middle level curriculum and middle level curriculum with high school curriculum.

Ideally, then, the curriculum at the elementary school is linked to what is taught at the high school. Through vertical teaming, school districts can strengthen the opportunities for all students to have access to—and be successful in—rigorous coursework.

While vertical teaming does help provide a coherent K-12 curriculum, the vertical team approach is also a valuable way to help students navigate the transitions between elementary, middle, and high school from an academic standpoint.

The key is to build on the collaboration, cooperation, and communication vertical teaming establishes as educators address the curriculum and focus on meeting the needs of the students.



### ARTICULATING THE CURRICULUM

Too often, the teachers at the elementary school level don't know what their subject area counterparts are teaching at the middle level, and the middle level teachers are unaware of how the content they teach is being built upon at the high school level. As a result, teachers may not be spending enough time—or they may be spending too much time—on basic skills or content. The result is students who are lost or frantic or bored.

Vertical teams work in each subject area to articulate the curriculum and ensure a seamless learning pathway for students moving into and out of the middle level. By continually monitoring the articulation, teachers can make changes when they discover gaps or overlaps.

As middle school teachers and high school teachers become more aware of the curricula, they gear their instruction to the appropriate level of difficulty. Teachers at all levels can spend more time on new concepts and material by reducing the time spent repeating what teachers at previous levels have covered. In turn, they can also provide a preview of what the next level brings.

Because they are familiar with the curriculum across grade levels, teachers also can make better-informed recommendations as students move to the next level.

For example, a recent concern in Millard Public Schools in Omaha, Nebraska, was that elementary school teachers were asked to recommend math placements for rising sixth graders without understanding the testing procedure or the scope and sequence of the sixth-grade math program. Millard Public Schools Curriculum Facilitator Peggy Brendel brought the fifth- and sixth-grade teachers and administrators together as a team to discuss the problem.

"Middle school math teachers and assistant principals met with fifth-grade teachers to share information about the math class offerings at the sixth grade," she says. "As a result, the fifth-grade teachers better understood the expectations for each math class, the materials that were used, and the testing processes. Armed with that information, they were better able to recommend their fifth graders for the most appropriate class," Brendel says.

This initial dialogue provided an opportunity for middle school and elementary teachers to begin talking about academic programs and student expectations, Brendel explains. "Teachers felt more informed at both levels. We had more meetings to discuss how the elementary math program impacted middle school math expectations."

Vertical teaming also promotes conversations about instruction. Discussions about successful and unsuccessful instructional strategies across levels not only help educators better understand the kinds of instruction students have been receiving, they also lead to cooperation in strengthening and expanding instructional strategies to support all students' learning needs.

Other topics of discussion may include homework expectations, assessments, and support for special needs students.



### CREATING STUDENT SUPPORT

As teachers become more comfortable with the vertical teaming process they are likely to broaden their conversations to include not only curriculum, but also the students themselves.

Ideally, this expanded dialogue builds a foundation for student support by getting teachers to talk more freely about the struggling students in the classrooms, those who are going beyond the standard curriculum, those who need extra help, and those who can provide extra help to others.

Teachers can share information about students' learning styles, their strengths, and their personalities. When teachers in the receiving school already know what to expect of their new arrivals, they are better prepared to meet those students' personal and academic needs. This, in turn, eases students' anxiety about academic expectations.

Phil Koch, principal at Kiewit Middle School in the Millard School District, explains that the middle school staff meets with the elementary school teachers to share information about not only the middle level organization and curriculum, but also about the students. "This allows us to place students with teachers who can teach to their specific learning style and better meet their learning needs," he says.

This same strategy is used as eighth graders move into the high school. "Because our middle school teachers are familiar with the high school curriculum, our middle school teachers' recommendations are better informed. The teachers at both levels have been working together, know each other, know the curriculum at the elementary level and the high school level, and are therefore able to make more informed recommendations for each individual student," Koch says.

### SUPPORTING TEACHERS

Vertical teaming also helps teachers in their transition from level to level, grade to grade, or simply in their own professional development. The collaboration and networking provide a support system that reduces teachers' feelings of isolation and helps them feel better about themselves and their work. That positive feeling can improve the classroom experience for students.

With the growth in the number of schools being built in many districts, vertical teaming also pays dividends in that teachers are familiar with each other and the curriculum at all levels so their transition to other schools is easier. They can also better orient new staff members.

### THE EXTRA MILE

Vertical teaming is not easy. Teachers are usually on different campuses and the time required for an effective vertical teaming program is sometimes scarce. Administrators should consider using inservice time to promote vertical teaming and encourage teachers to work in small groups to promote broader dialogue across levels.

Here are some of the curriculum-related activities Millard Public Schools use to ease the transition from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school:



### Elementary to Middle School

1. Fifth-grade teachers provide written information about rising sixth-graders to sixth-grade teachers.
2. In the spring, middle school special education staff members meet with fifth-grade teachers to discuss students with special learning needs. Students with special learning needs are referred to the Millard Intervention Team to help teachers develop strategies to meet academic, social, or emotional needs.
3. A middle school counselor meets with fifth-grade teachers to discuss placement and transition needs of all students.
4. A “jump start” program, focusing on core academic topics, is held several days prior to the opening of school for students who have difficulty with academic transition.
5. Teachers at successive grade levels meet to share student achievement information throughout the fall.

### Middle to High School

1. Middle level staff members provide recommendations to the high school staff about students who may benefit from alternative programs at the high school level.
2. During registration, high school staff members discuss curriculum options and collaborate with middle school teachers to help students register for the appropriate class.
3. Teachers at successive grade levels meet to share student achievement information throughout the fall.

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