

4-2015

Transition by Design: The Power of Vertical Teams

Linda Schlosser

St. John Fisher College, Lschlosser@sjfc.edu

How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?

Follow this and additional works at: http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_facpub

 Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Publication Information

Schlosser, Linda (2015). "Transition by Design: The Power of Vertical Teams." *AMLE Magazine* 2.8, 18-20.

Please note that the Publication Information provides general citation information and may not be appropriate for your discipline. To receive help in creating a citation based on your discipline, please visit <http://libguides.sjfc.edu/citations>.

This document is posted at http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_facpub/32 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.

Transition by Design: The Power of Vertical Teams

Abstract

It is no secret that middle school plays a key role in students' success in high school and beyond, but less well known is how innovative teacher-leaders use a strategy called vertical teaming to help young adolescents make that transition. This is the story of how one district in upstate New York used vertical teams to smooth the transition from the middle to high school, and in the process, improved students' overall academic achievement and the district's on-time graduation rates.

Keywords

fsc2015

Disciplines

Education

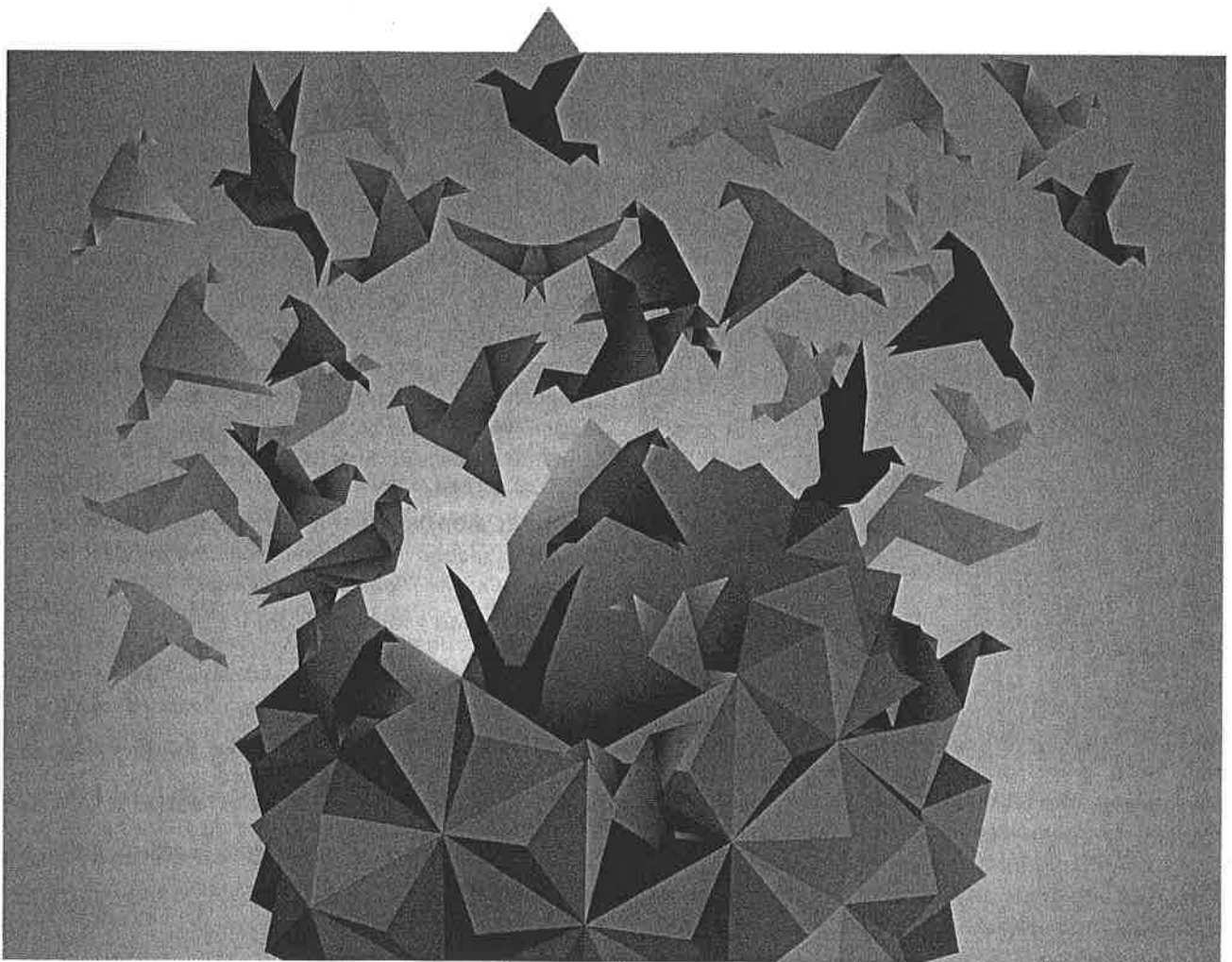
Comments

Article published in *AMLE Magazine* in April 2015, and also available on the [publisher's webpage](#).

Transition by Design: The Power of Vertical Teams

Multilevel collaboration helps students succeed at all academic levels.

BY LINDA SCHLOSSER



Students' middle school experience plays a key role in their success in high school and beyond—we know that. But less well-known is how an innovative strategy called vertical teaming can help young adolescents make their transition to high school more successful.

This is the story of how one district in upstate New York used vertical teams to smooth the transition from the middle to high school and, in the process, improved students' overall academic achievement and the district's on-time graduation rates. To tell the story and help you visualize ways you might

implement this concept in your district, we'll start with some background information on vertical teams.

What Is a Vertical Team?

If you believe that what happens in the middle years can affect students' success in high school, you know that *planning toward transition* is essential. Planning toward transition differs significantly from planning for transition. While the latter implies a set of one-time orientation activities, the former necessitates long-term teacher collaboration across the seven years of middle and high school. Vertical teams are the vehicle by which that can be accomplished.

Simply put, a vertical team allows middle school teachers to work with their subject-area counterparts in the elementary school and the high school to do the thing middle school teachers do so well: collaborate! Here's how it works.

Vertical teams are made up of teachers who represent multiple grade levels, including high schools, feeder middle schools, and sometimes elementary schools. Districts establish the teams, which are subject-specific as opposed to interdisciplinary, and organize formal, regular meetings to examine and align curriculum and instruction around students' academic and socio-emotional needs.

To get vertical teams off the ground, a district needs to endorse a profound change in the traditionally detached relationship that exists between middle and high schools. Vertical teams demand ongoing, consistent collaboration of teachers from both levels across time. This subject-specific collaboration is the key to determining concepts and skills that students must master for successful transition into and out of high school, and for identifying and putting into place the consistent use of teaching strategies that will enable students to reach graduation.

Work on a vertical team generally begins with asking questions about student performance. For example, vertical teams may examine course enrollment patterns, results from benchmark tests, and student motivation and disposition in a particular content area. They look at how concepts and essential skills are introduced and commonly taught across the middle and high school grades, and search for ways to eliminate redundancy or misconceptions that students may harbor before the misconceptions affect their learning. Vertical teams focus on strengthening the consistent use of academic vocabulary and effective teaching strategies.

Once they have identified areas for improvement, vertical teams prioritize and set grade-level goals, establish short- and long-term plans of action, gather data, and report back to the district. Their primary objective is to improve the quality of instruction for all students in the subject area and grades represented by the team.

When vertical teams are most successful, the curricular changes they initiate create support structures that make high achievement a reality for more students because they institutionalize a continuum of knowledge and skills that build from grade to grade. Most important, the work of vertical teams results in the intentional design of academic programs that prepare middle grade students to enter high school, and thus, gives them a better chance to graduate and go on to careers or college.

Vertical teaming is not a new concept. If you research the term on the Internet, in fact, you will see the variety of forms vertical teams have taken across the country. For example, vertical teams have been organized to address the teaching of a specific skill, such as writing, across multiple grades in a district, or to focus on a concrete goal like increasing enrollment in college preparatory courses by aligning the curriculum leading up to IB or AP courses.

Most often, however, vertical teams are organized to include middle and high school teachers who want to improve overall student performance in one or more core subject areas. Whatever the impetus, vertical teamwork promotes learning for understanding by helping students acquire the information and skills necessary to make meaning in a thorough and consistent manner across the grades, thus increasing retention and transfer of learning to new situations.

Ultimately, vertical teams can add rigor and personalization to the educational experience of young adolescents because they enable teachers to know students well in a different way--through the eyes of teams that examine, plan, and measure progress in specific subject areas across the years by eliminating the artificial boundaries between schools.

Work on a vertical team generally begins with asking questions about student performance.



Tablet App EXTRA!

To listen to a podcast with Linda Schlosser, download the App at www.amle.org/AMLEMagazine.

One District's Unusual Story

What happens when a high school has many ninth graders who have two or more F's for the first five-week period—and half of those students have been late or absent 20% of that short time?

In one school district in upstate New York, transition problems at the point of entry to ninth grade had long been recognized. Low attendance, poor academic performance, high rates of discipline infractions, and a marginal sense of belonging among incoming ninth graders had been documented for a number of years, and when high school teachers applied for and received a grant to find remedies for the problem, they turned to their feeder middle school for suggestions. The result was the establishment of a core group of teachers who oversaw the implementation of interdisciplinary teams at the ninth grade level—and this ultimately led to the creation of vertical teams in the core subject areas. But I am getting ahead of the story.

The coordinated efforts of middle and high school teachers to establish interdisciplinary teaming at the ninth grade level was the beginning of a vertical team approach. In this case, the work of the teachers was related to a concrete goal that crossed multiple subjects and engaged teachers from both the middle and high schools. Based on the success of teaming at the middle school, ninth grade interdisciplinary teams set four goals:

1. To better understand the needs, interests, and aspirations of all ninth graders, especially those at risk of failure.
2. To closely monitor ninth graders' progress toward graduation.
3. To provide academic and emotional support through tutoring and closer relationships with teachers.
4. To establish freshman mentoring programs in which seniors were matched with freshmen prior to entry and through the ninth grade year for regular social experiences and academic assistance.

After three years of work, the vertical team overseeing the ninth grade interdisciplinary experience found that 90% of the first group of ninth graders were on track to graduate from high school as determined by grades, credits earned, and the passing of required New York State Regents Exams. The 10% of students who were "on the bubble" were being closely monitored and provided with experiences over the summer to help them earn credits or pass exams.

The freshman mentoring program had been an outstanding success and freshmen who had been mentored as ninth graders were now applying to become senior mentors. In 2013, when the third year of funding for the ninth grade interdisciplinary teams and freshman mentoring activities at the high school ended, the scheduling of ninth grade teams and team leaders as the main avenue for connecting with freshman continued.

The work of the original vertical team has expanded to the creation of English, social studies, math, and science vertical teams, grades 6–12, which includes all the districts' high schools and feeder middle schools. Led by teacher leaders and administrators, core academic teams are refining instructional and collaborative strategies to meet specific academic and socio-emotional goals that have been set in each core subject area.

As one teacher leader explained, "[Vertical teams] give us the valuable information we need to work with kids... There is more of an interlocking of opportunities and responsibility towards graduation between the middle and high school buildings."

The Power of Vertical

Vertical teams foster creative, bold teacher leadership and encourage a culture of professional collaboration and shared responsibility. Successful graduates are successful not just because of their accomplishments in high school—their accomplishments in high school are clearly connected to their preparation in middle school. So, too, the struggling student's experience in middle school is more clearly recognized for its potential long-term outcome, and steps can be taken before it is too late. Middle and high school teachers, working together, can more easily see where each level contributes to the overall growth of students.

Most important, vertical teams make the transition to high school smoother for students who benefit from the common approach to academic language and compatible instructional strategies that are fostered through vertical team discussions. High school is much easier with the power of a vertical team designing the path. ■

LINDA SCHLOSSER is an associate professor in the Department of Inclusive Education at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, New York. She represents the Eastern Region on the executive board of NaPOMLE, the National Association of Professors of Middle Level Education.

✉ lschlosser@sjfc.edu