

## **Ending Isolation:**

### **The Payoff of Teacher Teams in Successful High-Poverty Urban Schools**

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#### **Abstract**

This qualitative analysis of teacher teams is part of a larger, comparative case study, “Developing Human Capital Within Schools,” conducted by the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers. Within one city, we interviewed 142 teachers and administrators in six high-poverty schools (traditional, charter, and turnaround), all of which had achieved the highest ranking in the state’s accountability system. Here, we analyze the role that teacher teams played in the experiences of teachers. Although all six schools emphasized the value of collaboration among teachers, only five relied on teams as a means for school improvement, dedicating substantial, regular blocks of time for teachers to meet. Teams focused on matters of content (curriculum, lesson plans, and student achievement) and the student cohort (individual progress, group behavior, and organizational culture). Teachers valued their work on teams, saying that it supported their instruction and contributed to the school’s improvement by creating coherence across classrooms and shared responsibility for all students. Factors that supported teams included having a worthy purpose in support of the school’s mission; sufficient, regular time for meetings; engaged support by administrators; facilitation by trained teacher leaders; and integration of the teams’ work with other supports for teachers.

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## **Introduction**

Many urban schools have chosen instructional teams for teachers as a central component of their improvement strategy. Teams are intended to decrease professional isolation, promote teachers' ongoing development, and substantially reduce well-documented variation in teachers' effectiveness across classrooms (Rivkin, S. G., Hanushek, E. A., & Kain, J. F., 2005; Rockoff, J.E., 2004). As they collaborate, teachers with different skills, areas of expertise, and levels of experience may find that teams not only support them in curriculum development, lesson planning, and pedagogy, but also offer professional relationships that sustain them and improve the instructional capacity and professional culture in their school.

Despite such promise and efforts by many to create teams, most schools are not currently organized so that teachers can collaborate regularly and intensively. Also, some scholars suggest that it may be unrealistic to expect teachers to engage seriously with teams because interdependence runs counter to professional norms of autonomy and privacy that have long defined teachers' work (Huberman, 1993; Little, 1990; Lortie, 1975). When teachers do participate on teams, they often tend to keep their colleagues at arm's length, protecting the core of their work from interference (Troen & Boles, 2012). They may discuss curricular options or suggest promising techniques, yet they seldom relinquish their instructional autonomy, ultimately returning to their classroom to teach much as they have in the past.

However, the role of teacher teams is rapidly evolving in many urban schools. In a recent study of teachers' experiences in six high-poverty schools of one urban district (Charner-Laird, Ng, Johnson, Kraft, Papay, & Reinhorn, 2015), all teachers interviewed reported having time allocated weekly for team meetings. Many across that sample said that they saw great potential in teams, yet teachers in only three schools judged their teams favorably. Teachers considered

both individual and organizational needs in assessing their team's "goodness of fit" with the demands of their work. That is, they judged whether their team helped them to teach better *and* contributed to a better school. Teachers in the other three schools said their teams were ineffective, largely because the principal had not defined a meaningful purpose for teachers' collaborative work, had excessively prescribed what teachers were expected to do, or failed to support teachers who took risks to improve instruction, either as individuals or as colleagues.

The current study focuses on the human capital practices in six elementary and middle schools (traditional, turnaround, and charter schools) all located in one large Massachusetts city. Each school served large proportions of students from high-poverty, high-minority communities. Notably, each had demonstrated success with its students by achieving the highest performance rating in the state's accountability system. We sought to understand one aspect of that success, specifically what these schools did to recruit, hire, support, and develop their teachers. Here we focus on their use of teacher teams to improve teaching and learning.

We found that administrators in all six schools valued and encouraged collaboration among teachers. In five schools they relied on teams as a key mechanism for improvement. Teams had two areas of focus. The first, *academic content*, included curriculum development, lesson planning, and ongoing review of data about students' learning and achievement. The second area of focus, *student cohort*, included individual students' well-being and progress, the cohort's behavior and compliance with rules, and the organizational culture that students in the cohort experienced. Teachers in these five schools spoke very positively about their work together, suggesting that their teams had achieved a "goodness of fit" with the demands of their work (Charner-Laird et al, 2015) by effectively addressing both individual and organizational needs for improvement.

In what follows, we first review the research context of this study, considering evidence about the potential of teacher collaboration to improve schools as well as the challenges facing those who rely on teams as a centerpiece of their work. Although the overall track record for teacher teams has been disappointing, we suggest that current changes in the conditions of schooling may improve the prospects for teams' success. After describing our research methods, we introduce the schools of our study and present our findings, explaining why teachers judged their teams to be effective. In doing so, we note important differences in how schools organized their teams, given the time and flexibility available to them. After discussing the factors that we found contributed to a school's effective reliance on teams, we conclude by considering the implications of this research for policy, practice, and research.

### **Research Context and Background**

Beneath the question of whether teachers successfully engage in teams lies a fundamental doubt about whether teachers actually want to collaborate with colleagues. For if teachers resist collaboration, either tacitly or outright, it may be futile for schools to invest scarce resources in teams. If, however, teachers see potential in teams, but are deterred by limitations within their school—scarce time, overwhelming demands, competing purposes, or lack of effective leadership—then it is important to better understand what it might take to address those factors so that teams can fulfill their promise.

Evidence about teachers' attitudes toward collaboration is mixed. Teachers repeatedly report that they depend on colleagues and value working with them (Drury & Baer, 2013). Yet, strong confirmation of teachers' successful, sustained collaboration remains elusive. In her clear-eyed analysis, Little (1990) concludes: "Schoolteaching has endured largely as an assemblage of entrepreneurial individuals whose autonomy is grounded in norms of privacy and

noninterference and is sustained by the very organization of teaching work” (p. 550). Few would argue that the nature of teachers’ work changed markedly during the decade following Little’s assessment.

However, as we assess the prospects for teacher teams today, we do so in a different context. Since 2000, the composition of the teaching force has changed rapidly with the entry of a new generation of teachers who have different expectations for their career and work environment (Johnson et al., 2004). At the same time, state and federal accountability policies have introduced stringent standards for assessing both students’ learning and teachers’ performance. Also, in response to charter schools and federal efforts to improve failing schools, additional resources and more autonomy have eased constraints on staffing, time, and budget allocations that, in the past, often interfered with teams’ development. These changes lead us to suggest that teams for teachers have the potential for greater success today than in the past.

### **The Structure of Schooling and Organization of Teaching**

Tyack (1974) explains that as the burgeoning US population moved to the cities in the late 19th century, the one-room schoolhouse served as the building block for age-graded schools. Assigning teachers and their students to separate classrooms created the “egg-crate school” (p. 44), a physical and organizational structure that was efficient, but proved to be inhospitable to collaboration. Many teachers hired in the late 1960s and early 1970s—the cohort now retiring—quickly learned that a career in teaching required them to function independently or, at best, with the approval of their principal and the ongoing encouragement of one or two peers. In 1990, Little reported that the “modal reality” of teachers’ work was “independence punctuated by occasional contacts among colleagues” (p. 513).

Deeply rooted norms of autonomy and privacy among teachers have continued to be a

fearsome deterrent to collaboration. Researchers widely agree that, despite enthusiasm about the benefits of collaboration, few teachers participate in what Little (1990) calls “joint work” (p. 520). Some scholars, notably Huberman (1993), argue that because teachers are essentially artisans who develop a personal craft, deliberate efforts to coordinate their instructional practice are unwarranted. However, others have documented the positive role that collaboration can play in school improvement (Little, 1982; Rosenholtz, 1989; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001).

Over the past decade, other scholars have reported a positive relationship between collaboration among teachers and students’ achievement (Gallimore, Ermeling, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2009; Goddard, Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, 2007; Parise & Spillane, 2010). In their large-scale analysis of statewide data from North Carolina, Jackson and Bruegmann (2009) found that, when a more effective teacher—one with a higher value-added rating based on students’ standardized test scores—joins a school’s grade level, students in all classes of that grade make larger achievement gains in English language arts and mathematics, both initially and over time. They call these widespread, positive effects, “peer-induced learning” (p. 87). Analyzing extensive data about school practices and student achievement in Chicago, Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu & Easton (2010) provide convincing evidence that students benefit when teachers work together on curriculum, instruction, and problems of practice within a school context that is grounded in strong norms of trust, respect and continuous improvement.

### **Changing Conditions May Improve Prospects for Teacher Teams**

Since 2000, changes in the context of schooling and the work of teachers may have improved the prospects for teams’ success. First, teachers who entered the profession around 2000 report having different expectations for their workplace than those of the veterans they

replaced (Peske, Johnson, Kardos, Liu, & Kauffman, 2001). Having grown up and been educated in a society where team play and project-based learning are rewarded, they expected to work closely with their colleagues and, in fact, dreaded the prospect of being isolated in their classroom (Kardos, Johnson, Peske, Kauffman, & Liu, E., 2001). After 4 years, only 17 of the 50 new teachers Johnson and colleagues (2004) studied remained in their original school, while 17 left public school teaching altogether, proportions that were roughly comparable to those of teachers nationally (Leukens, Lyter, Fox, & Chandler, 2004). The primary explanation teachers offered for leaving their school or teaching was that their workplace failed to support them in effectively doing the work they had chosen.

Some from this new generation assumed roles as teacher leaders during the second stage of their career, years 4-10. However, those aspiring teacher leaders often encountered subtle or overt resistance from more experienced colleagues whose practice they were supposed to influence (Donaldson, Johnson, Kirkpatrick, Marinell, Steele, & Szczesiul, 2008). Such challenges revealed the tension within many schools between the retiring generation's norms of privacy and autonomy and early-career teachers' expectations for collegiality and interdependence. As time passes, growing numbers of new teachers with an interest in collaboration appear to be increasing teachers' support for teams that require greater interdependence (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; McLaughlin, & Talbert, 2006; Horn & Little 2010; Coburn, Mata, & Choi, 2013).

Second, escalating demands for accountability have reduced teachers' expectations for privacy and autonomy. In 1990, Little conjectured: "As policymakers and the wider public press schools to achieve more ambitious and complex goals, school leaders in turn press teachers to collaborate in the service of those goals" (p. 320). In fact, this "press" built steadily, beginning

with publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 and continuing through state accountability policies of the late 1990s, the federal *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB), and the Race to the Top competition in 2010. Nationally, students' standardized test scores have been used to assess schools, with those failing to make "adequate yearly progress" being warned, sanctioned, or closed. Two decades earlier, teachers might comfortably do their best within their classroom, without feeling obliged to share responsibility for all the school's students. However, today's policies hold schools accountable for all sub-groups of students. In response, many schools now schedule common planning time, when teachers of the same students, grade levels, or subject meet to learn from one another and coordinate their work. Coburn, Mata, & Choi (2012) tracked the effect of district policy on teachers' professional networks and found that teachers changed their patterns of interaction and were "more amenable to outside influence than previously thought." Social policy, the authors conclude, "can play a role in fostering conditions in schools within which teachers seek out their colleagues, share information, solve problems, and learn from one another in their networks" (p. 331). Over time, therefore, accountability policies increasingly captured teachers' attention and influenced their practice.

Third, recent policies provide some principals with increased resources and flexibility to manage their school, which can be used to support teams. The formal authority that states grant charter schools to choose staff, allocate resources, and schedule time has spilled over into many conventional public schools. Many states and school districts today authorize various schools to exercise a range of autonomies similar to those of charters and some districts grant all schools broad discretion. In 2007, Baltimore's CEO transferred authority for many important decisions from the central office to the schools, including recruitment and hiring of teachers, curriculum, interim assessments, and budget allocations. In 2015 Denver Public Schools granted all

traditional schools extensive powers of self-determination. State officials in Massachusetts, where our study took place, not only authorized state-sponsored charter schools, but also established procedures for creating Innovation Schools, which remain under the authority of the local school district, but have charter-like flexibility. In response to such opportunities, many principals have seized on the opportunity to manage their own school's resources and time, allowing them to expand expectations and structures for teachers' collaboration.

Actions by the U.S. Department of Education also led to increased school-based autonomy and consequent changes in teachers' work and their workplace. Under the Race to the Top competition, states and districts could designate unsuccessful schools for "turnaround" (requiring them to hire a new principal and a staff including no more than half of the current teachers) or for "restart" (requiring that the school be managed by a new operator, often a charter management organization). For example, in Massachusetts, principals of turnaround schools could rehire current teachers, hire new teachers, and dismiss or transfer unwanted teachers. The three-year federal grants that these schools received through the state to support their redesign and improvement efforts often included funds to support additional professional development time and opportunities for teachers as well as expanded learning time for students.

Combined, these changes in the context of teaching and schooling—a new generation of teachers with different options and expectations, increased demands for school-based accountability, and additional resources and flexibility for many principals—have increased the likelihood today that teachers will accept, if not welcome, the opportunity to collaborate closely in teams with their colleagues.

## **Methods**

This analysis is part of a larger study in which we broadly examine the human capital

practices of six high-poverty, urban schools—all having received the state’s top rating in its accountability system. Here we focus on these schools’ use of teams and address the following research questions:

1. Do these six successful schools rely on teams to develop teachers’ practice and increase the school’s instructional capacity and success? If so, what purposes do the teams serve and how are they organized?
2. How do teachers assess their experience with teams in their school? What role do administrators play in teachers’ judgments about the value of teams?
3. Are there notable school-to-school differences in how these teams are organized and managed? If so, what are they and what accounts for them?

### **Sample Selection**

Our sample selection was guided by four principles. First, we sought a sample that included charter and district schools located in one city. Second, we limited our sample to schools that served high-poverty populations (where 70% or more of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) and communities of color. Third, we sought schools with a record of success in serving their students. Fourth, we sought schools that employed distinctive approaches to human capital development.

To attend to the first three principles, we examined publicly available demographic and student performance data. In seeking schools that were having “success” with students from low-income families, we used the state’s accountability ratings as a proxy for students’ academic achievement. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) rates every school on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 designating the highest performing schools. The formula calculating a school’s rating relies heavily on results from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), the state’s high-stakes standardized student test, administered annually to all students in traditional and charter schools. The formula accounts for

growth in student performance and the school's progress in narrowing proficiency gaps among subgroups of students, using a weighted average from the four most recent years of data. Although this definition of success relies heavily on standardized test scores, which have significant limitations, it was the best proxy available for identifying schools that have a positive impact on students' academic outcomes. Also, these measures were used by the state and district to sanction schools and by funders and the media to judge and reward them.

To attend to the fourth principle, we consulted our professional networks and reviewed available reports about the approaches to human capital development used by specific schools and charter networks. Based on our initial inquiry, we drew up a proposed sample of six schools—all geographically located within the boundaries of one large urban school district, Walker City School District (WCSD).<sup>1</sup> The sample included three district schools and three state-authorized charter schools. All were elementary and/or middle schools, facilitating cross-site comparisons. To recruit schools, we contacted school officials, explaining our study and requesting their participation. All six schools that we approached agreed to participate. (For descriptive statistics for sample schools see Table 1 in Appendix A.) The purposive nature of our sample allowed us to conduct an in-depth, exploratory study of these schools, each in a particular context. However, because the sample is small and deliberately chosen, we cannot generalize our findings.

## **Data Collection**

**Interviews.** Between March and June 2014, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 142 teachers, administrators and other staff in the six schools. Interviews with administrators lasted approximately 90 minutes and those with teachers approximately 45

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<sup>1</sup> All names of schools, districts and individuals are pseudonyms. Some details have been changed to protect anonymity.

minutes. At most schools, all members of the research team attended interviews with the principal and with the directors of CMOs. In addition, all three interviewed some teachers at each school, which facilitated cross-site comparisons, improved inter-rater reliability in coding data, and ensured that each researcher had informally observed elements of every school's structures, practices, and culture.

We also purposively constructed our interview sample at each school, recruiting a wide range of teachers, varying in demographics, teaching experience, preparation, and teaching assignment. We solicited teachers' participation by email, through flyers placed in their mailboxes, and by responding to the recommendations of other colleagues and administrators we interviewed. In addition, we interviewed key staff members (e.g. curriculum coaches, program and family coordinators) when it became apparent that their work and views would inform our understanding of teachers' experiences. We granted participants assurances of confidentiality.

In each school, we interviewed between 31% and 56% of the teachers, depending on the school's size, the complexity of the organization and the practices used (For descriptive statistics about the interviewees, see Table 1 and 2 in Appendix A). We used semi-structured protocols (Appendix B) to guide our interviews and ensure comparable data across sites and across interviewers (Maxwell, 2012). Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The interview protocols included questions that encouraged participants to discuss their school's approach to teachers' professional learning, including their work with colleagues. We asked whether teachers participated in teams and, if so, how those teams functioned. In addition, in response to questions about their overall view of the school, participants were encouraged to discuss aspects of their professional culture. Because our interviews addressed a range of related topics about human capital, we could learn how the work of teams connected to other practices.

In our school visits, we also observed a wide range of day-to-day practices and looked for evidence about the school's organizational culture.

**Document collection.** Although interviews were the main source of data for this study, we also gathered and analyzed many documents describing school policies and programs related to recruiting, developing and retaining teachers, such as teacher handbooks, school policies, schedules, meeting agendas, lesson planning templates, and data analysis forms used by teachers.

### **Data Analysis**

After each interview we wrote a detailed thematic summary of the participant's responses. We then analyzed those to identify similarities and differences across the sample as well as emerging themes in our study. In developing data codes, we supplemented the etic codes drawn from the literature with emic codes that emerged from this analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We reviewed a small sub-set of the transcripts, individually and together, in order to refine our definitions and calibrate our use of the codes. After finalizing the codes and improving inter-rater reliability, we thematically coded each transcribed interview using the software, *Dedoose*. (For a list of codes see Appendix C.)

Having coded all interviews, we created data-analytic matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to consider our research questions about teachers' teams. *Dedoose* allowed us to sort data by codes and by characteristics of participants. We analyzed the data for each school separately, completing a number of data analytic matrices and eventually conducted cross-site analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994.). We conducted member checks (Maxwell, 2012) by providing each principal with a detailed summary of our findings about their school. Throughout the process of analysis and writing, we monitored threats to validity by returning to the data to review our coding and check our emerging findings, seeking rival explanations and disconfirming data.

## **The Sample of Schools**

When we collected data in 2014, our sample of six high-poverty schools included three district and three charter schools. However, this seemingly balanced and straightforward count masks the schools' complicated and consequential histories. Two of the three district schools had recently emerged from turnaround status and one of the three charter schools was a traditional district school that had performed poorly and, consequently, was designated for restart by the state. Rapid changes in status, resources, and school-based authority reveal the substantial impact of policies intended to equalize learning opportunities for students from high-poverty, high-minority communities. By 2014, all six had achieved Level 1 in the state's accountability system.

### **The District Schools**

*Dickinson Elementary* was a century-old district school, serving a largely immigrant student population, most living in the school's immediate neighborhood. Dickinson was well regarded within WCSD and had recently been commended by the state for its performance. The school experienced unusually low rates of teacher turnover; in 2014, over half of Dickinson's teachers had worked there for more than 20 years. Dickinson's principal was required to comply with the WCSD teachers contract, as well as with state and district policies. Unlike the other schools in the sample, Dickinson had been granted no special autonomies. It was a traditional district school, implementing district policies and taking advantage of district resources, such as data coaches, curricular materials, and interim assessments.

*Hurston PK-8 School* and *Fitzgerald Elementary School PK-5*, also part of WCSD, had both been placed in turnaround in 2010 because of persistent failure. As turnaround schools, they were assigned new principals and could retain as many as half of the school's current teachers. The new Hurston principal replaced about 80 percent of the staff and Fitzgerald's principal

replaced about 65 percent. Subsequently, both schools demonstrated substantial growth on MCAS, allowing them to exit turnaround status at Level 1.

Although both schools continued to be part of WCSD after the state released them from turnaround, each retained significant school-based control of its organization and management, making it possible for them to continue many of their reform initiatives. Prior to turnaround Hurston PK-8 had been granted special status by WCSD, which provided the school with the authority to hire and transfer staff, choose a curriculum, allocate the budget and set its own schedule. As Fitzgerald PK-5 emerged from turnaround, the school successfully applied to the state to become an Innovation School, which functions as a within-district charter school and has many of the same autonomies. Both schools retained autonomy in hiring, budget allocations, scheduling, and choosing curriculum and interim assessments.

### **The Charter Schools**

*Naylor Charter School (K-8)* and *Rodriquez Charter School (PK-8)* were well-established state charter schools that opened in Walker City 10 and 20 years, respectively, before our study. As Commonwealth Charter Schools, they were free of all local district policies and could choose their curriculum, allocate their budget, hire and fire teachers, and set their school calendar. Initially, both were freestanding schools, although Naylor eventually became one of three schools in the Naylor Charter Network.

*Kincaid Charter School (6-8)* was part of The Kincaid Charter Network, a charter management organization (CMO) that the state had selected to restart WCSD a failing middle school in 2011, three years prior to our study. Network officials invited the school's teachers to apply for positions in the new charter school, but few did and no one who reapplied was rehired. Although all teachers and staff were new when Kincaid Charter School opened, most of the

students were not. Kincaid's administrators successfully recruited approximately 80% of the students who had previously enrolled in the middle school, a higher proportion than had typically returned to the school each year. As a restart, Kincaid functioned as an in-district charter school; the local teachers union represented its teachers and their pay aligned with WCSD's negotiated pay scale. However, the school was exempt from other provisions in the teachers contract, including those regulating the academic schedule, the hours of teachers' work, and evaluation practices. In addition, Kincaid administrators controlled budget allocations, curriculum, and interim assessments. Within two years, Kincaid Charter delivered significant gains in student test scores.

### **Teacher Teams as a Strategy for Improvement**

Teachers widely reported that they collaborated often with colleagues about curriculum, pedagogy, and their students, while administrators said that collaboration was a means for improving teachers' skills and coordinating their efforts on behalf of all students. Teachers said that working collaboratively helped them to manage the continuous, intense demands of instruction and to align their efforts with those of their colleagues. Teachers in all schools expressed respect for the knowledge, values, and hard work of fellow teachers. A Hurston PK-8 teacher's praise and confidence in her peers echoed the comments of many other teachers across the study: "[T]he amount of support we have as a staff, whether it's from administration or from each other, is amazing. We are a pretty cohesive group, by and large."

However, not all schools relied on formal instructional teams as part of their strategy for continuous improvement. Rodriguez Charter School encouraged teachers to work together and assigned instructional coaches to support individuals who needed help. When teachers' preparation periods coincided, they could use that time to collaborate. However, Rodriguez

administrators did not require teachers to meet regularly as teams and did not arrange common planning time, which might have made collaboration more likely. During the school's weekly professional development meetings, Rodriguez administrators often provided time for breakout groups of teachers to plan curriculum or review students' progress; yet teachers said they could not count on that time each week. Elementary school Principal Rega, explained that time was scarce: "The big problem, honestly, is meeting time. These teachers are so stretched that to put another hour in to meet someone else . . . It's very hard to add another meeting." Therefore, although Rodriguez teachers said that they collaborated with colleagues, they did not report that teams oriented or supported their work.

In the other five schools, team meetings occurred regularly and teachers widely said that their team helped them to teach better and contributed to their school's success. Individual teachers repeatedly described relying on their team. For example, when we asked a Fitzgerald teacher leader with 6 years of experience whom she would go to for support, she quickly responded, "My team members." When asked further what kinds of support she might seek, she answered, "Everything." When we probed further about when this might occur, she said, "Every day, many times." We heard similar accounts from supervisors and principals. A Leader of Instruction at Kincaid characterized the team as the teacher's "first line of defense" saying:

It's just a cohesive unit. . . . People are unified in their efforts here. You don't want to see anybody fail. I definitely think that, more so than at my [prior] schools, teachers feel like they can go to somebody and ask questions or admit if they're struggling with something and get support from their coworkers.

Fitzgerald's principal, Sharon Forte, reflected on her school's rapid improvement after having been placed in turnaround: "I would say a lot of our success is because we really work at teams.

The primary unit is the grade level team. . . . It's really like you are married to your team. . . .”

### **Teams Focused on Academic Content and the Student Cohort**

Although schools called their teams by different names, they essentially served two functions: *Content* teams focused on developing curriculum, lessons, and pedagogy. They also monitored student performance data (e.g., interim assessments, running records, exit tickets, or unit tests) to gauge the effectiveness of instruction. *Cohort* teams focused on the students' needs, behavior, and the organizational culture that they experienced. In some primary grades, the same group of teachers met to address both matters of content and the cohort, although in grades 5-8, where teachers typically taught a single subject, separate teams focused on content and the cohort. A Kincaid Charter School teacher described his school's team assignments:

You basically are always part of two teams. You're part of a cultural [cohort] team, and you're part of a department [content] team. Your department team teachers will never teach together, but you will plan [instruction] together. On your cohort team, you never teach the same subjects, but you all teach the same kids.

Teachers in all five schools had daily blocks of 50-60 minutes for preparation and development that were scheduled simultaneously as common planning time for teachers in the same grade level or content area. During at least one of these blocks each week, sub-groups of teachers met in teams to address academic content, the student cohort, or both. Teachers then used their remaining blocks of preparation time to work independently or meet with colleagues.

### **Content Teams Planned Instruction and Monitored Students' Learning**

All five schools had content teams, composed of teachers who taught the same subject(s) either within a grade or across grades. This included primary grade-level teachers who taught in self-contained classes and teachers of upper-elementary or middle school students, who taught a

single subject in multiple classes. Content teams sometimes included teachers of special education or English as a Second Language, who taught regularly in an inclusion class.

The schools in our study relied less on prepared curricula than their counterparts in many traditional schools and their teachers participated in collaborative planning, which occurred in the context of content teams. For example, Hurston’s elementary teachers met with their grade-level team to plan the sequence of topics and competencies they would all teach, which then guided their decisions about curriculum units and daily lesson plans. Second-grade teachers, who taught all subjects in self-contained classes, reported having spent their grade-level content meetings during the prior 10 months planning reading units that aligned with the Common Core State Standards. The team leader called this “a very daunting task. We [had] never had a common curriculum for reading.”

Throughout these schools, experienced and new teachers routinely reported that their grade-level and content teams reduced the uncertainty about what and how to teach and enabled them to meet the continuous demands of planning, teaching, assessing, and revising a curriculum that stretched throughout the school year. A Kincaid Charter history teacher with nearly a decade of experience summed up the benefit of his content team’s process: “[It has] helped turn the job of curriculum design into a much more manageable beast.”

**Integrated lesson planning.** We were surprised to find that at three schools—Fitzgerald PK-5, Kincaid Charter, and Naylor Charter—teachers also shared responsibility for writing daily lessons, a process that required them to meet weekly deadlines. Based on their analysis of state and local curriculum standards, the teams designed instructional units. Individual teachers then took responsibility for writing a set of lesson plans to be used by all team members. In some cases, lessons were very detailed, including scripted introductions, explanations, and questions

that the teachers could use to promote deeper thinking.

A second-grade teacher at Fitzgerald PK-5 explained his team's process: "There's three of us [at the grade level] this year. I do reading, another teacher does the math planning, and another teacher does the writing planning. Those are our core subjects." Principal Forte decided which teacher would take responsibility for each core subject, based on her judgment about their expertise. She also required teachers to use a uniform planning template. By Thursday of each week, Fitzgerald's teachers were expected to upload their draft lessons for the following week so that their colleagues and the school administrators could review them. Team members provided feedback during team time, while administrators responded in writing.

Similarly, Naylor Charter's teachers planned approximately five lessons each week, which they and others on their content team used to teach their classes. One teacher with 10 years of experience said, "Right now I'm planning math. . . One of my co-teachers is planning reading. . . and then another teacher's planning all of the science and writing." Another described his team's process: "We shift it. . . . I started planning with reading. This is my second time planning math. I planned writing once. I planned science for a while. So we just shift, usually with the units."

Some teams used most of their meeting time to refine these lesson plans, while others dealt with a broader range of instructional topics. This 7<sup>th</sup> grade ELA teacher at Kincaid Charter described her content team's meeting earlier that day:

We planned out our students' culminating essay for the unit that they're going to work on. We talked about what we want it to look like. We looked at exit tickets from this past week to look at the data of what it was showing us about their progress. We talked about what book we want to teach in the next unit, and then we looked at each other's lessons

for next week.

Most teachers at these three schools spoke very positively about integrated lesson planning. Preparing 20 lessons each week—as teachers of traditional, self-contained elementary classes often must—limits the depth of planning that any individual can do. Fitzgerald’s Principal Forte said, “The struggle is how do you keep people from burning out?” Teams, she said, were “a major part” of her school’s response. However, Fitzgerald’s teachers offered less consistently positive assessments of the shared lesson planning process than those in the other two schools, in part because the principal assigned teachers responsibility for particular subjects and required them to use a detailed template. One teacher, who spoke positively, recalled how he and his colleagues’ initially responded to the requirements: “We complained a bunch.” However, he said, “The principal made it very clear that teachers have their own styles. Even though you get a plan from me that is written in a very specific way, you need to meet that objective in the best way suited for you.” However, another teacher said that the process of lesson-planning was not taken seriously by Fitzgerald teachers, claiming that few actually used the lessons. Far more often, though, teachers spoke positively about shared lesson planning, while sometimes still expressing misgivings about the principal’s expectations for consistency, which sometimes eliminated instructional options that some teachers might have preferred.

Although interdependent lesson planning was meant, in part, to protect teachers from burnout, they were not all convinced that it reduced their workload. A math teacher with seven years experience at Naylor Charter said,

Co-planning is hard. It’s one of the reasons that people like working in schools like this and then also get burnt out working in schools like this. . . . So much of the planning [still] comes down to the teacher, making the materials, designing stuff themselves. It just

is a really—it's a lot of work.

Several schools maintained on-line banks of units and lessons, sometimes accompanied by videos of lessons being taught. Teachers who drew upon them said that these resources not only made their work easier, but also improved their instruction.

Several other teachers expressed concern about their loss of autonomy. One teacher explained, “[T]he biggest ‘con’ to working collaboratively is that sometimes the way you want to teach something is not the way the other person wants to teach. . . . It’s a problem to figure out common ground every single week. It’s rough and tough and exhausting.” Another teacher weighed the advantages and disadvantages of common planning time:

What doesn’t work well is kind of the same thing—that it’s shared. So you lose a little bit of control or a ‘lot bit’ of control sometimes over what is going in front of kids. Last year, where we had a team member who was not very strong at curriculum design and didn’t seem to like it very much—his lessons were not very good. It was frustrating in the sense that, through this process, unless the person . . . really wants to do well, it can have a kind of negative effect.

In these schools such differences either were eventually resolved or dissatisfied teachers left or were asked to leave. However, surprisingly few of the many teachers we interviewed said that they lacked confidence in their colleagues’ ability to plan curriculum or write lessons. One called her fellow teachers “rock solid,” an assessment that was consistent with those voiced by others. Still, even principals acknowledged that integrated lesson planning had some limitations. Principal Forte observed that, although its benefits were many, “It’s not perfect. Because when you don’t write your own plan, you don’t know it as well.”

**Monitoring students’ academic progress.** All schools in the study dedicated some team

time to analyzing data about students' learning, which helped them gauge the effectiveness of their instruction. Naylor Charter and Fitzgerald PK-5 scheduled separate meetings for data analysis, while Dickinson PK-5, Hurston PK-8, and Kincaid Charter incorporated data analysis into content meetings. For example, at Dickinson, Principal Davila met weekly with teachers from paired grade levels (k-1, 2-3, and 4-5), where they reviewed results from state tests, interim assessments, and assignments created by teachers. At Naylor, this work occurred in small subject-based teams. A math teacher described how his 7<sup>th</sup>-grade content team redesigned their unit on probability after students performed poorly on a new interim assessment that was aligned with the Common Core. "The depth of what they were being asked about probability increased pretty substantially." He said teachers on his team "weren't happy with the way the kids were performing on those types of questions and MCAS too. . . . There was one MCAS question that just destroyed our kids. It was something that we just had overlooked." He said that the team members realized that they needed to change both the "content and the ways we delivered it."

### **Cohort Teams Monitored Students' Needs, Behavior, and the Organizational Culture**

Whereas content team meetings explicitly focused on curriculum and instruction, cohort team meetings were dedicated to ensuring that students could and would do their part as learners and citizens of the school. Teams did this by systematically discussing the needs of individual students within their grade-level cohort, reviewing the group's behavior, and strengthening aspects of the organizational culture. For example, one of Kincaid's middle-school teachers described a typical Friday cohort meeting, where teachers discussed "what happened during the week, what students were doing well, what they were not doing well, whether any individual students had problems."

**Reviewing individual students' needs and progress.** All schools designated some team

time for tracking and discussing individual students, a process that many said increased teachers' shared responsibility for all students. Teachers reported that focusing on individuals during cohort meetings ensured that no student's personal needs or performance would be overlooked. At Dickinson PK-5 and Fitzgerald PK-5, this was largely done at grade-level meetings, which included both content and cohort discussions. However, each of these schools also convened a standing student support team that met weekly to systematically review the academic success and well-being of individual students throughout the school. Teachers and administrators believed that students' academic performance could be affected by their home life, and their socio-emotional health, and poverty. Other schools focused primarily on students' behavior within the school. Teachers at Hurston PK-8, Kincaid Charter, and Naylor Charter met in separate grade-level "cohort" teams where they reviewed students, both individually and as a group. By focusing on the academic and personal well-being of individual students, teachers could identify those who were experiencing difficulty in several classes and then intervene to get them back on track. For example, Hurston's middle school cohort teams met with relevant student support staff (the dean of discipline and counselor for the grade) each week. One teacher described the process for reviewing individual students:

It's as easy as, 'Hey, can we put Felix on the agenda for Friday?' It might start as an email early in the week. It could start like that or a casual conversation between teachers. Then we'd decide what has to happen from there. Is it a conversation with a teacher who has a relationship with him? Is it a phone call home? Sometimes we invite parents to come up during these meetings. We might set aside time. If the counselor's there, they might recommend a course of action. . . .

These interventions were generally effective, but sometimes required longer-term focus on

particular students over time. “If we do revisit, it’s usually like, ‘Hey, this isn’t working.’ . . . The students that we’ve presented, typically, whatever issue it is gets ironed out.”

**Monitoring students’ behavior.** Each school had a dress code; rules for how to behave in the corridors (for example, silence at Naylor and Kincaid, quiet filing at Fitzgerald and Hurston); and expectations for how to conduct themselves in classes (respectfully, attentively in all schools). Rules were designed to promote an orderly environment, conducive to learning. Teachers worked to make their expectations explicit and to respond consistently across classes. During cohort team meetings, they took stock of their students’ behavior, with some schools focusing more than others on compliance. At their self-described “no excuses” school, Kincaid’s teachers regularly reviewed individual students’ adherence to the school’s standards for dress and behavior, responding quickly and firmly to violations. Teams in several other schools focused their review more generally on whether the rules were being upheld by the group.

**Strengthening the cohort’s culture.** Teams also created new activities, incentives, and rewards to motivate students in their cohort. Teachers tried to nurture an organizational culture that kept students positively invested in learning. For example, Hurston middle school had adopted a set of behavioral norms called “PRIDE” (Perseverance, Respect, Integrity, Daring, and Excellence). Teachers recognized individual students when they acted in a way that was consistent with a PRIDE norm by giving them a small certificate. A teacher explained, “It was just in a moment, ‘You did something good; here you go. You have to earn 19 more of these to [qualify for] the ice cream party at the end of the month.’” She explained that this approach had “a more positive tilt than reactive punishment,” and added that “the top 80 percent of the class gets to go.”

At Kincaid Charter, where each grade level was divided into three cohorts, a teacher

explained that within her cohort “We all run our classrooms the same way, the same expectations for the kids. We have the same consequences. We have the same incentives. We have the same cheers, the same chants.” The teams also created activities, incentives, and rewards to motivate their students. One team leader explained that certain practices were “consistent” throughout the school, while others were “customized” for the cohort. For example, students were expected to “call out answers or raise their hands in similar ways across the school, but the prizes that we’re giving for highest homework completion might be customized by cohort.”

### **What Contributed to Teams’ Effectiveness?**

Despite considerable school-to-school variation in how teams worked, a similar set of factors emerged across schools that participants said contributed to their teams’ success.

#### **Having a Clear, Worthwhile Purpose**

First, teachers’ accounts illustrated the ways in which their work on teams was guided by a shared purpose. These groups of teachers were not meeting just to meet. Each of the schools had an explicit mission to eliminate the racial achievement gap and reduce educational disparities between wealthy and low-income students. The school’s mission gave purpose and practical meaning to teachers’ work on teams as they developed curriculum and lessons, assessed the success of their instruction, and monitored students’ behavior, needs, and progress. A Naylor administrator explained that the charter school achieved its mission by “giv[ing] our students the education they deserve.” These schools did not simply have a mission; they were, as Principal Forte told her teachers, “*on* a mission.” Based on her research in non-profit organizations and for-profit companies, Edmondson (2012) concludes that managers support effective teams by framing an “aspirational purpose” for their ongoing interaction (p. 100). In these schools, principals imparted that purpose through both words and actions. In contrast to unproductive

team meetings described by teachers in less successful schools (Charnero-Laird et al, 2015), these teachers described well-organized and productive meetings that were fueled by such a purpose.

### **Sufficient, Regular Time for Team Meetings**

Second, these schools gave team time priority over many other activities and, therefore, teachers could count on that time being protected, which made it worthwhile to prepare and actively participate. Hargreaves (1994) calls the work of teams in some schools “contrived collegiality,” because compulsory meetings lead to “predictable” outcomes and foster resentment among teachers (p. 208). That was not the case in these schools, where virtually all teachers we interviewed prized team time. Other studies have found that, when team time is short, intermittent, or unpredictable, meetings often become occasions for check-ins with colleagues about routine matters—playground monitoring or field trips—or opportunities for individuals to socialize or prepare for their next class (Troen & Boles, 2012; Neil & Johnston, 2005; Supovitz, 2002). Teachers in the schools of this study widely treated team time as inviolable.

Although each of these schools dedicated blocks of time for teams to meet, expectations for teams varied widely across the sample, depending on how much time that was available during the teachers’ work day and whether a collective bargaining agreement limited the principal’s say in how that time could be used. Of the schools we studied, Dickinson PK-5 had the least amount of dedicated time for team meetings and Naylor Charter had the most.

Dickinson’s teachers were required to be in school for six hours and were guaranteed five periods each week for preparation and planning. Principal Davila skillfully managed the schedule so that teachers had common planning time across two grade levels at once, thus allowing them to meet in smaller, horizontal or vertical sub-groups. The WCSD contract

authorized the school principal to decide how teachers used one planning period each week. Although this was far less time than other principals of the schools we studied controlled, Davila made the most of it by convening and facilitating weekly team meetings across two grade levels. As she explained, “they plan together and collaborate and talk about individual students,” interactions that typically then extended beyond a single weekly meeting: “They have four common planning times, and if I walk around during their common planning times, they’re usually sitting in each other’s classrooms, talking about planning.” Teachers confirmed that they spent many hours working with colleagues during their preparation periods, at lunch, and on their own time after school.

At the other end of the spectrum was Naylor Charter School, where teachers were not unionized and had an 8½ hour work day. Grade-level teams convened daily for a content meeting, where teachers jointly developed curriculum and revised lesson plans. The same teams met for another block each week to review data about their students’ learning and achievement. Then, every Friday during the school’s professional development time, grade-level teams continued their work together for an additional 1-2 hours. In addition, Naylor’s teachers met weekly as cohort teams to review the progress of students they shared and to discuss discipline and culture within their cohort. Samantha Nelson, director of the Naylor Charter Network, explained that the network had “big expectations for collaboration . . . One of our four big organizational values is ‘We grow best together.’” The school’s generous allocation of team time reflected that belief and reinforced that priority.

Administrators at other schools did their best to protect and dedicate regular blocks of time for team meetings. Charter school heads could create their own schedule for professional development and team meetings. Due to the autonomy their school retained after existing

turnaround status, teachers at Hurston and Fitzgerald met as teams during two or more planning periods weekly, which most teachers welcomed.

Providing predictable time for collaboration proved to be essential, both to make collaboration possible and to convince teachers that school leaders believed their joint work together was valuable. A Hurston teacher explained:

We now have schedules that are like a dream. It's arranged so that our content and grade-level meetings are two consecutive hours a week. That uninterrupted time is so precious that we can actually get a whole lot of work done. . . . This year, the new piece is that the grade-level teams all meet at the same time. That way, if we need to check in about something or two teams might need to come together on something, we can do that.

Therefore, although arranging and securing sufficient time for team meetings was far more challenging in some schools than others, administrators across all five schools succeeded in doing so. In response, teachers willingly invested in the process and participated in serious, sustained work with colleagues.

### **Ongoing, Engaged Support by Administrators**

Teams benefited further from administrators' support and attention, either up close or from a distance. Several principals attended meetings often, although Davila was the only one who regularly chaired her school's team meetings. Hurston's administrators each took responsibility for following teachers' work on four content teams. Principal Hinds' assignment included English language arts teams at three grades and the school-wide arts team:

Those are my four teams. So I go to almost all of their meetings. . . . All of us, the administrative team, are on the Google Docs for all the teams and the listservs for all the

teams so that we can follow electronically what's happening, even if we're not there.

A middle school teacher leader in math commented on the principal's role:

He doesn't micromanage, but he plays a role in some of the small decision-making we have in our different teams. He'll pop up and attend different team meetings or he'll read the notes and give feedback. But it's not "Okay, you guys. You have to do this. This team, you have to do this. This team, you have to do that."

A second-grade teacher confirmed this account: "He's there more just to keep it on track and suggest and answer questions when they come along that none of us on the teaching level really know that answer." However, several teachers said that when ELA test scores in grades 3-5 failed to improve over time, Hinds stepped in, took a more active role, and, as one said, "laid down the law," requiring the team to focus on skills featured by the Common Core, such as close reading.

Kincaid's administrators, like Hurston's, sometimes took a more active role if a team encountered difficulties or test scores stalled. A supervisor in math said, "Our seventh grade team, I go to almost every planning block just because they've struggled more, just in terms of getting results in student achievement. I'm there just to provide extra support to them." She contrasted that with her involvement with the sixth- and the eighth-grade teams, where "I pop in every once in a while, because the teams are just really strong and the [teacher] leaders are running the show really well, so I tend to not prioritize being at those." At a minimum, other principals and administrators emphasized the importance of the teams' work and closely followed the teams' plans and decisions.

### **Facilitation by Trained Teacher Leaders**

One of the most notable and promising practices in the three schools where the state had

intervened (Hurston PK-8, Fitzgerald PK-5, and Kincaid Charter) was that teacher leaders formally facilitated teams. Hurston committed a full-time administrator to supervise these teacher leaders' work, meeting weekly with each to review the prior team meeting and help to plan the next.

With very few exceptions, Hurston's teachers praised their team leaders, although not surprisingly, some who held the role found it challenging. A content team leader at Kincaid, who met weekly with his supervisor, said that he was still trying to understand his role, which "straddled a line" between manager and colleague: "We work as a team, but I am a point person . . . . [The] "opportunity for constant discourse . . . is super enriching, and fulfilling for me as a teacher—knowing that I'm making an impact, not only in my classroom, but I'm affecting the entire grade." A sixth-grade teacher at Kincaid, who had taught only three years when she was appointed to be a content leader, was at first reluctant to take the position. However, she said, "it ended up being the most fulfilling and exciting thing of this year."

Hurston and Fitzgerald both relied on federal grants to provide a \$6000 stipend to all teacher leaders who facilitated teams, funding that ended once the schools successfully exited from turnaround. In response to the lost funds, Hurston secured a small grant from a local foundation, reduced the number of teacher leaders, and reallocated the administrator's time so that he supervised only two experienced teacher leaders who, in turn, supervised others. When we collected data, teacher leaders at Fitzgerald still held their positions, but no longer received stipends. Principal Forte had encouraged individuals to continue in their role without pay, an arrangement proposed in the school's application to become a state Innovation School. Several teachers suggested that this adjustment was working in the short run. However, others expressed doubts that the role would continue to be effective as an unpaid assignment. At the newer

Kincaid Charter, teacher leaders also received a \$6000 stipend for facilitating teams, although participants said that the stipend was expected to drop to \$2500 the following year. This led several to suggest that interest in the position might drop, especially given the demands of the work.

### **Integration with Other Sources of Support for Teachers**

Teams were not an isolated initiative in any of these schools. Every school had a purposeful set of mutually reinforcing approaches to hiring, supporting, and developing teachers. Ambitious recruitment and hiring procedures were designed to ensure that teachers were well-matched with their school. From the time they accepted a position, all teachers understood that they would be expected to collaborate with colleagues. Teachers repeatedly expressed confidence in the quality of the hiring process, in part because it provided assurance that they could count on their colleagues. Also, administrators observed teachers' instruction very frequently, providing them with written feedback and discussing their responses in face-to-face meetings. Therefore, team meetings were not teachers' only source of instructional feedback. If teams had been disconnected from, or at odds with, other supports, they likely would have gained far less acceptance and commitment among teachers.

### **Intended and Unintended Consequences of Teams**

Overall, teams achieved their intended effects of augmenting and reinforcing collaboration among teachers, increasing coherence across classes and grades, building a consistent curriculum, and ensuring that teachers assumed responsibility for one another's success. Teachers credited their teams for their students' and their school's success and often said that they chose to stay at their school because of its steady support for teams. In addition, teams had several unintended consequences.

Administrators and teachers said that teams promoted professional accountability among teachers as well as academic and social coherence across classes and grades. As one experienced Kincaid teacher explained,

There's a big emphasis on teamwork, whether it's within cohort or whatever department you teach in. You have to be willing to be a team player, which I think is very easy to say but very [difficult to do]. Because teachers like their autonomy. Most of them like to be able to go into a classroom and decide what exactly they want to do that day. . . . They like to be able to change things. But when you work as a team, you don't have the autonomy.

Asked what she would tell a prospective teacher who was interested in teaching at Kincaid, she said, "Be ready to be on a team and be ready to be accountable to your team." Without that readiness to participate, she explained, "you're going to have to have some hard conversations with your team, perhaps with your [supervisor]. Just get on board."

Repeatedly, teachers and administrators offered evidence that they deliberately aligned their instructional expectations for students. They variously spoke of "increasing rigor," "high expectations," and "consistency across classrooms." One Fitzgerald teacher explained that the coherence achieved within grade levels not only would be apparent to students who compared their classes and also to visitors:

If the superintendent of schools were to walk into the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade [area] and just poke his or her head into every classroom—or anyone from the state just popped in, they should be able to experience the same level of instruction in every class. It doesn't necessarily have to be word for word the same lesson, but the rigor of it and the experience of it should be the same.

However, these schools had not yet achieved vertical coherence from one grade to the next, although combining grade levels in team meetings at Dickinson led teachers to consider the importance of knowing more about the classes “above” or “below” them. A team leader at Hurston said, “I think vertical integration is still [ahead as] a huge area of growth for us.”

Teams also provided induction for new teachers. No schools reported having deliberately created teams as a means of integrating new teachers into the life of their school, yet teams served that purpose. As members of teams, newly hired teachers quickly became fully engaged with their peers in making consequential decisions. Also, they could observe others’ classes and be observed teaching as part of the school’s routines, rather than waiting for intermittent help from a single mentor, whose interests and pedagogical style might not align with their own. A teacher at Kincaid described the ongoing, informal interactions among his team members, saying,

I think [that’s really important] for the new teachers, because even if you don’t know everything, you’re always informed with everything. There’s no, ‘I’m doing this and I’m going to hide it because it’s such a good idea.’ Everybody knows about it

Meanwhile, more experienced teachers could learn new skills from early-career teachers. This type of “integrated professional culture,” which engages teachers with differing levels of experience in shared responsibility for students and peers, has been shown to be effective in retaining teachers (Kardos & Johnson, 2007).

One drawback of these schools’ reliance on teams was that teachers who were specialists sometimes had no team to call their own. At all schools, art, dance, music, and physical education teachers taught students during the blocks when teams of core teachers met. With so much of the school’s energy being devoted to teams, teachers without a team sometimes suggested that they felt excluded. Special educators or ESL teachers, both those who pushed into

classes and those who pulled students out for tutoring, often were expected to organize their own collegial meetings. As one resource room teacher at Fitzgerald said, “I don’t really communicate with anybody on a regular basis.” The sole science teacher at another school said with disappointment “I’m kind of on my own here.” Although some teachers of the arts, special education, or ESL met together, many still did not feel that they belonged in the same ways that regular classroom teachers did.

### **Policies Affected the Structure and Practices of Teams**

No policies required all schools to have teams, yet policy indirectly, but powerfully, affected the likelihood that teams could be an effective component of a school’s improvement strategy. As they managed their schools, most principals relied on additional autonomy and authority granted through state regulations, charter school laws, state grants, and local WCSD provisions for schools with special status. Of the schools we studied, only Dickinson functioned without some additional flexibility beyond what the district afforded all schools.

The details of these policies affected principals’ authority to intensively recruit and select their teachers. Those in the state-sponsored charter schools (Naylor and Rodriguez) hired their teachers and could dismiss them at any time. Principals at Fitzgerald, Hurston, and Kincaid had hired or rehired their teachers when their schools entered turnaround or restart. When Hurston and Fitzgerald exited turnaround, the principals retained most of their staffing authority. As principal of a school that had been granted special status within the district before turnaround, Principal Hinds retained the right to hire teachers, dismiss ineffective probationary teachers, and transfer those with tenure in WCSD if they did not meet the school’s expectations. Dismissing tenured teachers still required him to follow formal procedures specified by the district and the state. At Fitzgerald and Dickinson, the principals could hire and dismiss probationary teachers,

but could not force anyone with tenure to transfer out of the school. If they sought to dismiss a tenured teacher, Principal Forte and Dickson too had to comply with state and district procedures. Unlike the other district principals (Hinds and Forte), Davila had never been granted the authority to replace tenured teachers as part of a turnaround process or transition to special status. Nonetheless, virtually all teachers at Dickinson were proud to be there, respected Davila's high standards and sought to meet them.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

This study focused on six schools, all of which successfully served students in high-poverty, high-minority communities. Five schools relied on teams of teachers in their work to develop and maintain a coherent, effective instructional program, monitor students' experiences, and establish and sustain a positive school culture. Although the sixth school strongly encouraged collaboration among teachers, school leaders there did not organize teams or designate a regular time for them to meet. The large majority of teachers and administrators in the remaining five schools endorsed teams as a valuable mechanism for improvement that benefited both teachers and their students. Teachers said that teams reduced the isolation of teaching, supported them in developing curriculum and lessons, ensured that students received attention, and contributed to a more interdependent, effective school.

Teachers participated in both content teams (with colleagues who taught the same subject) and cohort teams (with colleagues who taught the same students). Sometimes at the elementary level, the same team served both functions. Teachers' main task as members of content teams was to develop curriculum and track the effectiveness of their instruction and students' learning. In three schools, individual teachers prepared lesson plans, which they critiqued and shared with team members, who then all taught them. As members of cohort teams,

teachers identified students who were having difficulty and devised responses to support them. They reviewed student behavior and created activities and incentives to instill and reinforce the school's core values and mission.

Overall, teachers reported that teams in these five schools supported their instructional needs while advancing the school toward its goals. Various factors were said to contribute to the teams' effectiveness. These included having a worthy purpose, being assured of sufficient, regular time for meetings; experiencing ongoing, engagement and support by administrators; facilitation by trained teacher leaders; and being integrated with other sources of support for teachers. Several of these factors were substantially influenced by policy. State-authorized charter schools, schools under the state's oversight during turnaround or restart, and district WCSD schools that were granted special status had more discretion in staffing, funding, and scheduling than Dickson had as a traditional district school. This evidence suggests strongly that, in the right context and with the right conditions, teacher's welcome interdependent work. However, the data also suggest that success depends on policy makers and school leaders deliberately and steadily maintaining policies and practices that make regular collaborative teamwork not only possible, but probable.

### **Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research**

In these five schools, teachers widely said that school-based instructional teams were central to their instructional improvement and the school's overall success. Teachers are unlikely to readily commit scarce time to team meetings unless they are confident that the time will be well spent. Therefore, effective teams do not simply happen; they require ongoing tending. Principals played a crucial role, not only in acquiring the supports that teams needed in order to work well, but also in managing those supports effectively. They actively invested in their teams'

work.

The principals of these schools recognized that implementing teacher teams was a comprehensive, not a piecemeal process. Other principals who seek to create successful teams can learn a great deal from the administrators of the schools we studied. Fundamental to these teams' success was the confidence teachers had in their peers' knowledge, skills, and commitment. Most attributed the quality of teachers in the school to a thorough hiring process and ongoing supervision of instruction, both of which principals largely directed. The principals also carefully managed the school schedule to facilitate teamwork and informal collaboration. Common planning time and regular, dedicated blocks of team time require administrators' deliberate efforts to ensure that teachers who should work together can and do work together. Without such careful planning, assurance, and support, competing obligations will steadily undermine the potential of teams.

Also, it was principals who set a clear, meaningful purpose for the team's work, grounding it explicitly in the school's mission. Motivated by this purpose, teachers then invested in their team's work, even when that work was uncertain and difficult. Although principals differed in the extent of their active involvement with teams, teachers knew and appreciated that they closely followed their progress. Principals who set out to rely on teams as a mechanism for instructional improvement can be confident that success is possible. However, principals who think that they can form self-managing teams and then move on to other priorities are likely to be disappointed.

Teachers, too, can take heart from this study. Across the schools, teams met teachers' expectations that by participating actively they might teach better and contribute to a more successful school. Teams reduced teachers' isolation and provided induction for new teachers,

which far surpassed the hit-or-miss quality of many mentoring programs. Three schools' teams were said to function especially well because teacher leaders facilitated their work, highlighting the potential benefits of differentiated roles for teachers. If schools are to move beyond the limitations inherent in the egg-crate school, then teachers will need to acknowledge and act on the fact that some of their peers are more knowledgeable and skilled than others. These three schools not only capitalized on their teacher leaders' expertise, but also gave promise to other teachers that their career opportunities might expand as they developed professionally.

This study also has important lessons for policymakers. Policies provided these principals with various autonomies, which, used effectively, enhanced the teams' work. Principals of all schools except Dickinson had substantial discretion in staffing, scheduling, and budget allocations, each of which had important consequences for the success of teams. In some cases, principals held all formal authority for these functions; in others, such as hiring or the use of time or resources, teachers also had a say. Some reformers assert that all principals should have broad autonomy in managing their school. However, simply granting principals the authority to make decisions will not, in itself, lead to effective teams. For certainly many charter schools fail to accomplish what these schools did, even though their principal may have comparable or more discretion. It's also important to recognize that Principal Davila at Dickinson managed to make teams work in her school, despite having less formal autonomy than other principals.

No one should conclude that all schools (and their teachers) would benefit if only principals were granted broad managerial authority. To state the obvious—that all depends on the principal. Recent research documents the importance, not only of collaboration among teachers, but also of relational trust among teachers and administrators (Bryk et al, 2010). In their 2014 study, Johnson, Reinhorn, Charner-Laird, Kraft, & Papay, found that, when a principal took

an inclusive rather than an instrumental approach to teachers' participation in decision-making, teachers were more willing to invest in school-wide reforms. Arguably all principals seeking to rely on teams for improvement should become skilled at developing relational trust and practicing inclusive leadership.

On the other hand, this study does suggest strongly that principals should have a substantial say in who teaches in their school. No principal or its staff should be required to accept a teacher who is reluctant to teach there or expects to be unfettered by the school's expectation. In fact, at the time of our study, WCSD was moving in that direction. Bryk et al. (2010) conclude that "teachers who are unwilling to take on the hard work of change and align with colleagues in a common reform agenda must leave" (p. 208). Although we are not arguing that teachers should be at-will employees, as they were in the state-sponsored charter schools of this study, we are convinced that they should understand and accept the school's norms and expectations before being offered and then accepting a position. Then they should be held to a high standard in their day-to-day work by both peers and their principal.

Schools also must have adequate funds and flexibility if they are to arrange common planning time and sufficient meeting time for teams. These school leaders understood that the demanding work of teams could not be completed at lunch or after hours—even though many participants described how collaboration that began in meetings often extended beyond the school day and extended outside the school. Both students and teachers in traditional public schools deserve more time for learning and development. Often such time is made available when a school has been targeted for improvement and then withdrawn once it makes progress. However, using short-term grants to fund improvements in failing schools is unlikely to ensure long-term success. While they were in turnaround, Hurston and Fitzgerald used additional money

to institute important reforms, including extra time for professional development and stipends for teacher leaders who facilitated teams. However, with the loss of those funds and additional budget cuts by the district, some predicted that the progress they achieved could easily be lost and those who had worked so hard would be left frustrated and cynical. This suggests that policymakers may have to dedicate substantial additional funds over the long-term in order to ensure that effective practices endure and that high-poverty schools can maintain the level of success they have achieved for their students.

Further research is warranted about many topics that emerged from this study—the conditions that support collaboration among teachers, the role that teams play in instructional improvement and teachers’ career decisions, the conditions that support effective team leadership by teachers, and the ways in which principals can advance their school’s mission by endorsing and supporting teams. For example, do differences in the structure and facilitation of teams affect what they accomplish? How does participation on various types of teams (content, cohort, horizontal, vertical) influence teachers’ instruction and students’ learning? Do the benefits of joint lesson planning outweigh the challenges inherent in the process? If so, do those benefits play out at all grade levels and in all subjects? In what ways does participation on teams affect teachers’ instructional practice? How does the experience of facilitating teams influence teacher leaders’ subsequent career moves? In schools where teachers report having effective teams, what attitudes, skills and behaviors do principals exhibit?

All of these questions would benefit from the depth of inquiry provided by comparative case studies and complementary surveys conducted in a variety of state and local contexts. The research presented here demonstrates that teams can be effective and that, under the right conditions, teachers embrace and benefit from interdependent work. However, if research is to

sufficiently inform policymakers and practitioners about how best to improve urban schools, we need to know much more about why teams succeed or fail in different contexts. We must learn which supports are essential, not only in establishing teams, but also in maintaining and strengthening them on behalf of all students and their teachers.

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## Appendix A

Table 1. *Selected Characteristics of Six Sample Schools\**

School Name	School Type	Grades	Estimated Enrollment	Students				
				% Low-income	% African American or Black	% Latino or Hispanic	% Other Non-white	% White
Dickinson Elementary	Traditional District	PK-5	370	76	4	85	2	9
Fitzgerald Elementary	District - Former Turnaround	PK-5	390	85	70	25	3	2
Hurston PK-8	District - Former Turnaround	PK-8	800	75	41	54	4	1
Kincaid Charter Middle	In-District Charter Current Restart	6-8	475	88	50	30	10	10
Naylor Charter K-8	Charter	K-8	500	82	70	24	5	1
Rodriguez Charter PK-8	Charter	PK-8	420	72	55	20	7	18

\*Enrollment numbers and percentages are approximated for confidentiality purposes.

Table 2. *Number of Interviewees at Each School*

School Name	Administrators*	Non-Teaching Staff **	Teachers in Training	Teachers	% of Total Teachers in the School Interviewed
Dickinson Elementary	1	2	n/a	15	56
Fitzgerald Elementary	2	2	n/a	14	47
Hurston PK-8	4	5	n/a	21	31
Kincaid Charter Middle	5	4	2	16	38
Naylor Charter K-8	2	3	2	17	46
Rodriguez Charter PK-8	3	3	3	16	36

\* Administrators include directors of CMOs and school based administrators who directly supervise teachers.

\*\* Non-teaching Staff includes instructional coaches, parent coordinators, data leaders, recruitment officers, deans of discipline and other administrators who do not teach students and do not supervise teachers

Table 3. *Total Teachers Interviewed at Each School & Years of Experience*

School	Novice* (1- 3 years)	2nd Stage (4 - 10 years)	Veteran (11+ years)
Dickinson Elementary	3	5	7
Fitzgerald Elementary	1	11	2
Hurston PK-8	6	11	4
Kincaid Charter Middle	4	11	1
Naylor Charter K-8	8	7	2
Rodriguez Charter PK-8	1	9	6
<b>Totals</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>22</b>

\*Does not include Teachers in Training

## **Appendix B: Interview Protocols**

### **Teacher Interview Protocol**

Intro: Study Explanation emphasizing that we really want to learn about your experience at this school.

1. Background:
  - a. How did you come to be in your current position at this school?
  - b. Starting with college, can you tell us what you've done?
    - i. Probe for: training and employment
2. Current Teaching Assignment:
  - a. What do you teach here?
  - b. How did you wind up in this position?
3. Overall view of school:
  - a. If another teacher would ask you, "What's it like to teach at \_\_\_\_\_?" How might you respond?
  - b. What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a teacher here?
4. Hiring:
  - a. How were you hired at this school? Step-by-step.
  - b. Do teachers play a role in hiring other teachers? If so, how?
  - c. Has the hiring process changed at this school? If so, how and why?
5. Induction:
  - a. Did you have some kind of induction as a new teacher at this school? What worked and what didn't?
  - b. How are new teachers inducted now? How have things changed since you got here?
6. Support:
  - a. What kinds of supports are available here for teachers to improve their instruction?
  - b. What works well for you? What doesn't? (Probe: PD, Coaching, Collaboration, Evaluation)
7. Evaluation:
  - a. How is your teaching evaluated? Describe the process.
  - b. Was it helpful? How?
8. Administration:
  - a. Who do you go to for support? For what?
9. Social & Psychological Supports:
  - a. What sorts of social and psychological supports does your school offer for students?
  - b. What support do you get for interacting with parents and families?
10. Career goals:
  - a. How long do you expect to stay at this school? In what roles?
    - i. If yes: What keeps you at this school?
    - ii. If no: Why do you think you might leave?
11. Union:
  - a. What role does the union or the contract play in this school?
12. More: Do you have any additional comments?

## Principal Interview Protocol

Overview of Study: 6 Schools, All high-poverty, high-minority. All Level 1.

1. Background:
  - a. How long have you been at this school? Prior experience in education? Anything else we should know about how you got here?
2. School Overview:
  - a. Could you first provide an overview of its structure and programs?
  - b. (Where applicable) What does it mean for your school to be a pilot/turnaround/charter school?
  - c. (Where applicable) How did you go about selecting teachers when ---- was placed in turnaround?
  - d. How would you describe it to a teacher or parent who might be interested in it—both its strengths and weaknesses?
3. Teachers: We'd like to get a sense of who your teachers are.
  - a. Where do they come from?
  - b. What formal or informal preparation do they have?
  - c. What attracts them to the school?
  - d. Approximately, what proportion has fewer than 10 years of experience? 5 years of experience? 0-5 years of experience? (Has that changed or remained steady?)
4. Recruitment and Hiring:
  - a. Could you describe the process you use to recruit and hire teachers? (Applicants per position? Teaching demonstration? Who decides?)
  - b. What challenges do you face in recruiting teachers?
  - c. Are there specific demographics or subject areas that you have trouble finding/attracting? If so, how have you addressed those challenges?
5. Assignment:
  - a. How do you assign teachers to a particular grade or subject?
  - b. Could you describe the teachers' responsibilities, both during school hours and outside of school hours? Scheduled and unscheduled time?
6. Compensation:
  - a. Please tell us about the pay scale for teachers. Are there additional stipends? If so, can you describe these opportunities?
7. Collaboration:
  - a. Are the teachers organized by teams, grade-levels, subjects? If so, what does that mean for how they do their work? What is the work of those teams?
8. Supports:
  - a. What supports can a new teacher count on in getting started? And for more experienced teachers?
9. Role:
  - a. Are there specialized roles for some teachers? (Teach Plus, team leaders, etc.) If so, please describe these roles.
10. Curriculum:
  - a. Does the school provide a curriculum for the teachers? If so, please tell us about it.
11. Professional Learning:
  - a. Do you have formal professional development? Instructional coaches? If so, please tell us about them.

12. Supervision and Evaluation:
  - a. How do you supervise teachers? How do you evaluate teachers? Are these separate processes? Do students' test scores play a role in evaluating teachers?
13. Dismissal:
  - a. How frequently do you dismiss or decide not to rehire a teacher? Reasons?
14. Retention:
  - a. How long do teachers stay? Why do they stay? Why do they leave? Is there a type of teacher who stays or leaves? Is turnover a challenge?
15. Policy Context:
  - a. Does state or local policy play a role in how you approach building your teaching capacity?
16. Union:
  - a. What role if any does a teachers' union play at your school?
17. Have we missed anything?

## Appendix C: List of Codes and Descriptors

Codes	Description
Assignment	Teacher Assignment: What do you teach/ your job at the school, views of your assignment
Background	Background: Past work history, education
WhyTeach	Why teach? Personal sense of purpose can include changes in views over time.
SchoolOverview	Facts about the school (the facts but not mission or culture), might include specific school goals
HistorySchool	History of School
FacultyComposition	Descriptions of the composition of the faculty
Equity	Interactions, policies or dynamics described in relation to race, ethnicity, social class
Hiring	Related to teacher recruitment, hiring, including teacher's experience of being recruited / hired. --timing, demo lessons, debriefs, meetings with current teachers, written applications, Who the school seeks and how they find candidates
WhySchool	Why chose school - why teach at this particular school? May reflect changes over time
Mission	Descriptions of what the school aspires to accomplish (if explicitly talking about mission do not double code with culture)
AdminAdmin	Interactions / relationships among administrators (including non-teaching positions such as coaches and guidance, deans and other non-teaching roles)
AdminLeadership	Descriptions of administrators' style, vision, agenda, priorities, purposes, etc. (includes self-descriptions)
AdminRole	Specific responsibilities and job descriptions of non-teaching faculty
AdminStudent	Relationship between administrators and students (include coaches, guidance, deans and other non-teaching roles)
AdminTeach	Interactions between administrators and teachers (include coaches, guidance, deans and other non-teaching roles in this code)
Demands	Teachers professional responsibilities and expectations, work hours, teachers views on demands
Resources	Material and human resources (money, buildings, positions, --if it is about admin roles will be double coded in Adminroles) - Facilities
Accountability	Related to external accountability (state accountability status and state testing, turnaround status) - what the state does and then what is done as a result
DistrictNetworkState	Formal relationships / governance from State, District or CMO, includes school boards and trustees
Testing	References to standardized tests, state tests, network tests and interim assessments and how used in the school
MonitoringStudents	Teachers' use of assessments and instructional strategies to monitor achievement
Student	Student Characteristics: Descriptions of students and their community
Neighborhood	Descriptions of the local surroundings of the school
Family	Ways of connecting families and community to school, Perceptions of parents/ families + Teacher and admin connections to parents / families
CurriculumPedagogy	What and how you teach - including instructional planning
SpEdELL	Descriptions of programs or approaches for educating students with special needs and /or ELLs
SpecialSubj	Referring to non-core academic classes (art, music, library, dance, etc) and extra-curricular or co-curricular programs or activities
SchoolCulture	Expressions of school-wide norms & values including kids, teachers and parents (not explicit statements of mission), big picture that everyone from school would understand

Colleagues	Commentary on colleagues and their characteristics (what I think about the people I work with) - big picture impressions of colleagues
ProfCulture	Professional Culture- the norms of being a teacher or admin in this school. Big picture expectations for how we work together as professionals
Eval	Related to teacher supervision and evaluation: observations, feedback, meetings between supervisors and teachers, how work with teachers on instruction
Coaching	Formal instructional coaches, but NOT induction mentoring
Induction	Programs and supports (formal and informal) for new teachers: prior to day 1 and after day 1
FormalCollab	Deliberate, structured groups working together-organized by the school- including whole school sessions – including approach to lesson planning and who is included and who is not - JUST TEACHERS
InformalCollab	Specific work with colleagues that is not organized by the school, informal collegial interactions -JUST TEACHERS
RolesTeach	Formal roles and opportunities for career advancement (Teach Plus etc.) may have double coding when example of influence through a formal role including leadership teams, Teachers in Training, etc.
InfluenceTeach	Teacher opportunities as brokers of influence (teachers generally in their work having influence), including committees where you can voice concerns - Admin change view because of a teacher
CareerGrowth	Individual professional growth for career progression
OrderDiscipline	Safety, systems, expectations and rules for students, and enforcement
StudentSupports	Social and emotional and academic supports for students and behavioral - outside of classroom structure
StudentTeach	Interactions among teachers and students inside and outside the classroom.
Turnover	Why other people stay or leave; both causes and frequencies, personal plans to stay or leave, also about satisfaction and dissatisfaction, might be stuck in job
Pay	Payscale, stipends and other things related to compensation
Partners	Partners including City Year, Teach Plus, Ed Schools, etc.
Union	Related to the union and the contract
Gem Quote	This is a great quote.

**Descriptor Categories for Characterizing Interviewees**

<b>Descriptor</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Response options</b>
School	School Name	
Grade Level	Grade Level Presently Taught	Non-teacher, pre-k, k,1, 2, 2 or more grades, all grades, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
Gender	Gender	Male, female
Position	Position in the school or system	Recruitment officer, CMO administrator, principal, non-teaching faculty or administrator, teacher, assistant teacher / resident teacher, split role: teacher and other non teaching job
# years at this school	# of years working at this school counting this year	
# years at charter	# of years working at charter schools in total	
# years at district schools	# of years working at district schools in total	
# years at private schools	# of years working at private schools in total	
# years teaching	total of charter, district, private years	
Race / Ethnicity	Self-identified race / ethnicity	Black, White, Caribbean, Cape Verdean, Latino/a, multi-racial, other, Asian
Classroom type	Type of classroom in which interviewee teaches	Self-contained elementary multi subjects, departmentalized core subject, specific subject non-core, ELL/ Special Ed only
Age	Age of interviewee	