



Success Indicator IN15: The school leaders schedule common meeting times during the school for instructional teams working with ELs. (5892)

Overview: Faculty members often want more common meeting time (CMT) with colleagues both inside and outside of their content area. However, merely having CMT does not mean that teachers inherently know how to use this time effectively. Educational research clearly indicates that trust among teachers is key to effective CMT, which should focus on curricular collaboration and academic work instead of falling into reactive complaints about students. Administrative guidance for CMT is key but must be balanced against providing instructional teams with a degree of autonomy. ESL specialists, bilingual counselors, and other key members should be included in the structure of CMT, as ELs are most at risk for fragmented instructional experiences, especially in high schools. Otherwise, CMT may default to a meeting of general educators and leave ELs further behind.

Questions: What is CMT, and why is it important? Should CMT be subject-specific or cross-disciplinary? How should teachers discuss student progress and coordinate their efforts? How can administrators cultivate effective CMT?

What is CMT, and why is it important, particularly for teachers of ELs?

CMT is an intentional block of time regularly scheduled in the school day, week, or month to allow for teachers to collaborate. In rare cases, it can be as much as two hours a day (Letgers, Adams & Williams, 2010). The phrase “common planning time” is also used interchangeably. CMT has grown in popularity but often correlates with how well-resourced a school is, as it requires strict, protected planning periods, which can be difficult to achieve in schools with high teacher turnover or staff absences. Teachers in understaffed schools are at times required to cover other classes during CMT; they miss not only CMT but also traditional planning periods. Schools should avoid this practice at all costs, as those with at least four 30-minute CMT periods per week have shown higher student achievement (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2000).

This collaborative structure can be either subject-area based or interdisciplinary. CMT time should be reserved for focusing on how to better serve students, particularly students who show a lack of progress across multiple classrooms or subjects. Teachers spend this time ideally looking at student work, planning units together or developing specific strategies to reach disengaged students.

Time is often cited as the biggest obstacle to having robust CMT (Dever & Lash, 2010). Anyone who has ever built a complex school schedule knows that creating a common meeting time is far from an easy process, particularly in large, comprehensive high schools. Mertens et. al. (2010) categorized schools into three tiers to explain why having CMT matters. Tier 1 schools had common meeting time for at least thirty minutes four times a week – at least two hours weekly. Tier 2 schools had less CMT, and Tier 3 schools had none at all. Tier 1 schools, which had the most CMT, reported higher job satisfaction among teachers, better interactions with colleagues, and higher student achievement, particularly for students on free-and-reduced lunch (FRL). Students in Tier 1 schools even reported

lower levels of depression than their counterparts in Tier 2 and 3 schools. Research is clear that prioritizing CMT reaps benefits to students, staff and families alike.

Should CMT be subject-specific or cross-disciplinary?

There has been much debate over whether CMT should include interdisciplinary or content-area teams. The ideal scenario is to have both opportunities as part of a weekly schedule and a professional learning community, as each addresses different school needs.

Dever & Lash (2010) found that teachers in content-area groupings were more focused during CMT as opposed to interdisciplinary groups. Since they already spoke a common subject-area language, particularly at the secondary level, these teachers were more readily able to design common curricula and test out instructional strategies together. ESL teachers, by contrast, may have to juggle helping students in multiple subject areas and thus already know how to bridge subject-area divides. In one case study, a shared curriculum also helped these conversations happen more easily (Lawrence & Jefferson, 2015). ELs in particular benefit from these collaborative sessions among teachers, especially if they are receiving EL services in a pull-out model without established co-teaching partnerships with general educators (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2010). CMT may be the only reliable opportunity for different teachers to collaborate.

Interdisciplinary solutions are often essential for EL student success. Decades ago, Lipsitz (1984) established that the most successful schools are ones with interdisciplinary teams that had CMT, which heightened collegiality and professionalism. More recent research has tied CMT to student achievement as well (Mertens et. al, 2010). Scholars have also tied CMT to students having a better self-concept and being more satisfied with their schooling, which naturally increases family satisfaction (Warren & Muth, 1995). Interdisciplinary teams are still crucial, even if they are harder to implement, especially in traditional high schools with discrete subject-area teachers (Louis, Marks & Kruse, 1996).

How should teachers discuss EL student progress and coordinate their efforts?

Although CMT is distinct from time for PD, the two should be interconnected. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) emphasize that teacher learning should be inter-

active and social. Merely providing instructional strategies often fails to improve students' outcomes (Cohen, 1990). Teachers are more likely to change their practice during ongoing conversations that CMT can foster rather than one-time PD presented by an outsider (Desimone, 2011). Teachers have to fully understand the mistakes that students are making in their classrooms. Without CMT, they have few structured opportunities to uncover these areas for improvement in a supportive environment with their colleagues, as opposed to formal observations.

CMT does not automatically transform schools, of course (Letgers, Adams & Williams, 2010). Adults must meet together regularly and frequently to coordinate lesson plans to improve student progress (Letgers, Adams & Williams, 2010). This work is even more important for ELs, who may be pulled out of class for services or given a different schedule than general education students. ELs may experience disjointed schedules and lessons and struggle to integrate foundational skills with grade-level knowledge. This fragmentation is especially common in traditional public high schools, while elementary teachers may find it much more natural to collaborate across subjects.

CMT allows teachers to personalize instruction and identify early on EL students who are falling behind, or who may only be falling behind in certain classes (Letgers, Adams & Williams, 2010). This time does not have to be restricted to teachers. Teams can meet with both students and families during CMT to discuss concrete action plans and accommodations.

How can administrators cultivate effective CMT?

Assume that a school is able, with enough resources and time, to have both subject-specific and interdisciplinary CMT. Even in this case, CMT is hardly enough if that time devolves into a discussion of logistics and other issues that could be better communicated in other settings (e.g. in memos, emails, websites, or group messages). Common meeting time should be focused on facilitating EL student progress so that teachers can coordinate their instruction across classes. Researchers have often found that teachers who do not trust each other, who see themselves as independent islands, and who have not been trained to use the time effectively fall back into reactive talk. In other words, they spend CMT sharing "war stories" about student behaviors without proactively



considering how to change their own practice (Dever & Lash, 2013; Cook & Faulkner, 2010).

Administrators, therefore, should not have a totally hands-off approach to CMT. While teachers need the latitude to respond to student diversity and instructional issues, and they thrive in schools with more flexible governance arrangements (Louis, Marks & Kruse, 1996), too much autonomy can render CMT useless. School leaders must model how to use time constructively to focus on teacher actions rather than student actions alone, and to avoid spending too much time on housekeeping issues (Dever & Lash, 2013). Autonomy can foster drive and motivation, but too little initial training can mean that teachers have little motivation to work together (Dever & Lash, 2013).

Thus administrators, working with teacher leaders, should:

1. Establish a clear vision for CMT. Teacher should also have opportunities to see effective CMT in action in order to model those behaviors – behaviors that focus on curriculum and instruction (Mertens, 2010).
2. Mandate common tasks, such as creating an assessment together, to start a foundation for greater teacher autonomy once meeting norms and teacher relationships have been established (Wurtzel, 2007). Even when CMT is teacher-led, teacher leaders still want a measure of guidance from administrators (Dever & Lash, 2013). As teachers spend more and more time talking about instruction, off-task talk and discussion of school policies will decrease (McQuaide, 1994).
3. Prioritize CMT when building schedules with weekly meetings at a minimum;
4. Set aside time to model CMT expectations at the start of the school year;
5. Distribute leadership to prevent one person from dominating CMT (Mertens, 2010).

Teachers should use CMT to:

1. Monitor student engagement;
2. Guide differentiated instruction and credit recovery or ESL lessons;
3. Identify and immediately respond to EL students who are falling off track; and
4. Target school-wide, grade-level wide, subgroup and one-on-one interventions (Letgers, Adams & Williams, 2010).

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