

I hope you had a chance to attend parent conferences last November and speak to your child's teachers about their progress and ask any questions that you might have.

I had a mom sit down with me in the gym to ask me why the district has adopted the 'team' approach for middle schools and what teams offer to kids and parents that a traditional approach does not.

It is a great question and the answers are wide-ranging and important.

To begin my answer to that question let me describe what school here is like without teams.

A non-teamed school would be organized as a junior high school. This means literally a high school for 'junior' sized kids. Each student is randomly issued a computer generated class schedule for the required classes in the designated grade level. Seven periods later, the student's day has been completed and off they go for home. The seven teachers very likely don't know who the other teachers are that any particular student has. The teachers have no way to know how the student is doing in the other classes or what major projects or tests those other teachers may be assigning at the same time.

A student the English teacher may know who is capable of producing wonderful writing might be getting by with handing shoddy written work in to the social studies teacher, with that social studies teacher never realizing the student is capable of far better quality. How would the social studies teacher know? All that is ever handed in for a social studies assignment are minimal answers written in sentence fragments. When the social studies and English teacher never consult with one another about individual students, useful information will not be shared.

A student having an academic or social problem is seen by any one adult for fifty minutes in a day and there is little communication about those problems beyond a 'heads up' alert to a parent or counselor before the 'problem' moves on to the next adult. Every fifty minutes a new batch of kids arrives and by the end of the day, the teacher has seen 150 different kids.

A sense of anonymity resulting from a lack of 'belonging' results in kids making (and getting away with) far more mistakes socially. Rude behavior, bullying, aggression, fighting, vandalism are all behaviors we expect to see much more of in large cities vs. small close knit rural communities where everybody knows everybody. The same poor behavior is more likely to occur in schools organized in a manner that emphasize anonymity. During a passing period in a junior high, all 640 kids are loose in the halls at the same time and the supervisory capacity of the staff is strained to the maximum. Remember, that is 640 people all aged

about twelve. That's a lot of anonymity combined with a lack of social skills and poorly developed judgment wrapped up in a lot of physical energy!

As you may be aware, North Pole Middle is the only school in the district that includes sixth graders with the seventh and eighth graders. This is due in part to the population growth in the area that has seen our feeder elementary schools become quite crowded. NPMS is the building where the space is available to provide those sixth graders with a classroom.

It isn't hard to understand the reluctance of parents with a sixth grader to want them set loose in a building with a junior high model of organization!

In a middle school, teachers are grouped to form 'academic teams'. A common example of an academic team in a 'middle school concept' would see core content teachers (English, Math, Social Studies and Science) assigned to work together with a group of 100 students. These teachers would have their classrooms grouped together to limit student need to roam the building between classes to get to their next class.

The team of teachers is given significant control over their instructional blocks of time. This allows a team to plan a field trip without taking the student out of other content classes. Teams can adjust their use of time to allow more elaborate and time intensive science labs than would fit into a standard length period.

Teams can use their blocks of time to conduct community building activities, celebrations, or special projects without affecting the other teachers in the building.

A very important consideration for the teaming of teachers is the 'cross-curricular' academic planning that happens. When a team of teachers has a shared planning time they can work to avoid some common problems found in a junior high model. Teachers can coordinate assignments and tests so that kids aren't overwhelmed with work one week, and are 'homework lite' the next. An example for sixth graders is in the way the traditional sixth grade 'country report' is worked on in a team configuration. In social studies class kids can be working on the maps for their report. In math class they might be working on the various graphs that will be required. In English class they will have reviewed how to take notes and provide document citations, and have time to be working on the actual writing of the report. The science teacher might make a contribution with a study of geology and landforms. By the time the student reaches the end of the country report, they have had considerable academic focus and opportunity for guided work time. The homework aspect of the project is to wrap up loose ends instead of telling mom the weekend before it is due, that the project needs to be started.

A frequent complaint of kids in all schools is that they don't see the point of what they are studying. An important aspect of the cross curricular planning effort, is that the results show kids how topics of study are related. Ultimately, the work done for the country report contributes to the grade for many classes.

A very valuable aspect of teaming is the consistency of classroom rules and work expectations. Rather than dealing with myriad sets of rules and consequences, teams set policies that all teachers and students can hold in common. Another valuable aspect of teaming is the additional support teachers can give to parents and students. This might take the form of daily reports in the day planner about homework, missing work or conduct. A parent with concerns can request a meeting with the teachers and have easy access to all the team members during their communal planning time.

Kids are humans too, and it is not uncommon for people not to like things that are hard for us. If a student struggles in math, it may be the English teacher on the team who has the bond with that student and can encourage or assist that student with their math work.

Now all of this has great potential but perhaps the aspect of teaming in a middle school that is most transforming of the school experience are the social bonds that are made between teachers and kids when they are members of a special group. Team affiliations give a sense of belonging to something important. From Brownies and Cub Scouts, to members of the basketball team or book club, teams of kids working together with common cause and shared experience form bonds that are valuable. Shared work, shared success, shared responsibility, shared rewards, - these attributes break the anonymity of a kid randomly assigned a slot in a classroom on the far side of the building with 25 other kids many of whom are only seen as a group for that fifty minute period.

A short version of this essay might be simply to say that a junior high model emphasizes efficiency for the system at the expense of the student. A middle school model puts the emphasis on the student through effective use of resources to meet the specific learning needs of eleven, twelve and thirteen year old learners.

The return of the middle school concept and application of its tenets means the work done inside of the building once again matches the name over our front door.