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## Teaching Teams

### A 21st-Century Paradigm For Organizing America's Schools

By Arthur E. Wise

Schools of the 21st century must break away from their 19th-century, "egg carton" organization. A new paradigm based on how professionals work in this new century is needed. The egg-carton organization, with its identical cells, expects that every teacher will replicate the appropriate curriculum and instruction for 25 students each year, every year, from the beginning to the end of a teaching career. The model, resilient as it is, has outlived its usefulness. Among its dysfunctional consequences are high teacher turnover, especially in hard-to-staff schools; a maldistribution of teaching talent; and the achievement gap.

It is time for a different approach. Many children in hard-to-staff schools are taught by enthusiastic but underprepared Teach For America graduates, career-changers who know their content but not how to teach, and novice teachers who have not been adequately prepared for the challenges they face. Meanwhile, in other classrooms, dedicated, seasoned, accomplished teachers work successfully but, given the egg-carton organization of the schools, are not easily able to share their expertise with novices. A growing number of university personnel are ready to bring their expertise to the schools, but they find that the old-fashioned organization makes it difficult. It is time for a new paradigm.

The education and policy communities must think boldly. Schools cannot continue to operate using the now dysfunctional 19th-century factory model. Schools must be redesigned around principles adapted from the organization of professional work in the 21st century. Professionals do not work alone; they work in teams. Professionals begin their preparation in the university, but do not arrive in the workplace ready to practice. They continue their preparation on the job.

In medical, legal, and architectural settings, the services are provided by experienced and novice professionals working together to accomplish the goal—to heal the patient, win the lawsuit, plan the building. The team delivers the services. The experienced professionals are accountable to the client for those services and are responsible for the performance of the novices. The novices do much, often most, of the work, but do so under supervision. Experienced personnel create structure and are prepared to step in when necessary. The novices learn by doing, with feedback and correction by mentors. Different

roles and responsibilities reflect different levels of knowledge, experience, preparation, and expertise. Compensation rises to reflect increasing levels of responsibility.

How would these principles apply to teaching? Imagine, for example, six elementary classrooms. With average compensation packages of \$60,000, it would cost \$360,000 to staff six classrooms serving 150 students. Is there a more productive way to spend \$360,000? What would happen if a teaching team delivered services to 150 children? How might such a team be constituted?

The key requirement is that the structure must afford accountability to students, while enabling those new to teaching to serve while they learn. Many possibilities exist once the school is liberated from its antiquated design. The architecture of the egg carton needs to change as well.

One example involves a team of 17 members with a total cost of \$360,000. An accomplished professional, such as a teacher certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, would lead the team with the assistance of another senior teacher. Other members of the team would include two novice teachers who intend to commit themselves to teaching as a career; two under-prepared teachers, who want to serve but may not be committed to teaching as a career; and six

half-time student teachers who are completing teacher preparation. The team would also include four interns who work half time and for half pay as they conclude their initial preparation to teach. And, finally, a university faculty member would work half time with the team as a teacher with special responsibilities for overseeing the student-teachers and interns.

Salaries might range from \$90,000 for the team leader to \$30,000 for novice teachers, with part-time compensation for interns and a university faculty member, in addition to the unpaid student-teachers.

Senior team members would be responsible for instruction, but the planning and delivery of instruction would involve all team members. It would include the full array of instructional methods, such as large-group, small-group, tutorial, and computer-assisted learning. While senior personnel mentored and supervised less experienced personnel, those senior teachers would remain accountable for the performance of the students

**Our 19th-century 'egg carton' organization has outlived its usefulness—and had dysfunctional consequences.**

as well as the personnel in training. Less experienced personnel would assume progressively greater responsibilities as they gained knowledge and experience.

This approach would take the guesswork and anxiety out of instructional practice for the inexperienced personnel. Having to reinvent the wheel—including lesson planning, classroom management, student evaluation—as a first-year teacher, especially an unprepared or underprepared teacher, has overwhelmed beginners for years and drives many from the classroom. The novice team members would experience less stress, gain more direction, and have time to reflect on their instruction under supervision. Planning, professional-development, and conference time could be built in to the day, because not all 17 team members would need to be engaged directly with students 100 percent of the time.

With teaching teams, work could be structured in such a way that a team member who was particularly strong in math and science could lead that area, while another team member could lead English/language arts/social studies. In fact, teams could be organized by grade (six 1st grades), multiple grades (1st to 3rd grades), subjects, or even multiple subjects (math and science).

Teaching teams could operate especially effectively in professional-development schools, alliances of colleges of education and public schools that strengthen initial teacher preparation and continuing professional development. Professional-development schools, like teaching hospitals in medicine, serve as a bridge from the university to the world of practice. (*See Education Week, Commentary, Feb. 27, 2002.*)

Teaching teams could solve the major problem American education faces as it enters the 21st century: a dual education system—one system for the “haves” and another, vastly different, for the “have-nots.” These systems have two different teacher and student populations. New policies that require the disaggregation of student test scores on the state, national, and international levels have brought this fact into sharp focus. State tests, and those from the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, regularly reveal disparities in the scores of students in well-staffed schools and those in hard-to-staff schools. It is a national scandal.

One major cause of this problem is the 19th-century model of school organization and its assumption that all schools will hire a qualified teacher for every 25 students. Unfortunately, with today’s teacher salaries and the challenges of teaching in hard-to-staff schools, that assumption is unfounded. Well-off suburban and urban schools hire the qualified teachers. Hard-to-staff schools are stuck with the unprepared and underprepared, who struggle and then quit. Students in hard-to-staff schools are taught by a succession of would-be teachers, thus ensuring the creation and maintenance of the achievement gap.

The traditional proposal has been to increase teacher quality and supply by offering increased compensation and better

working conditions. This now-familiar refrain about the need to raise teachers’ salaries and standards has been repeatedly sounded by reports, commissions, and polls over the past 15 or 20 years. Unfortunately, policymakers have shown no inclination to raise teacher salaries or to improve working conditions in hard-to-staff schools, so any meaningful progress is at a standstill.

The new model creates incentives for accomplished teachers to elect to serve in hard-to-staff schools. It also makes productive use of their expertise in creating a system that supports novices as they learn how to increase student achievement. Teaching teams not only solve professional-development and human-resource problems, but also address other serious problems:

- The “holy grail” for many educators has long been *individualized instruction*. Teaching teams allow instruction to be organized so that some of it can be more effectively tailored to individual student differences.

- The shortage of *mathematics and science expertise* in elementary schools can be addressed by the expertise of some team members. Teaching teams overcome the unrealistic expectation that all elementary teachers will have mathematics and science expertise.

- In the egg-carton model, the *cost of technology* is additive. Teaching teams allow for the more productive use of technology, as it is incorporated into the many instructional strategies made possible by team staffing.

## Teaching teams could solve the major problem American education faces as it enters the 21st century: a dual education system—one system for the ‘haves’ and another, vastly different, for the ‘have-nots.’

The 21st-century teaching-team concept, especially when coupled with the idea of professional-development schools, can solve the problems of teacher quality in hard-to-staff schools. Teaching teams should be tried in other settings as well, for their potential to support ongoing teacher development and improve instructional services to children. It is time to break the mold of the 19th-century school and take lessons from the way service delivery, preparation, and induction operate in other professions in the 21st century. ■

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