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Introduction

I was a classroom teacher and instructional coach for ten years. But as much as I loved teaching, I decided I wanted to reach more students and help support more teachers than I could working in a single school. I left the classroom, and for the first time I started working for a private education company.

And what a shock it was!

I was hired as assistant to the CEO with a focus on special projects, a pretty fancy job for an ex-schoolteacher. A big part of my new job would involve meeting the needs of my new boss, whether that meant driving him to the airport or offering my input on projects based on my experience in the classroom. Our corporate office was pristine. There was no code on the copier, and the supply closet was unlocked! I was free to grab supplies without writing a rationale on what I would use those pencils and Post-its for. But I was completely out of my comfort zone. I remember sitting at my desk the first week thinking, *But what do I do all day? Who checks on me? Who organizes my time?* I couldn't understand this newfound freedom because I had never experienced it before.

As a teacher, I had been told what to teach, when to teach it, and sometimes even how to teach it. Vocabulary lessons went from 9:00 to 9:15. Lunch was at 11:27 every day, and that didn't mean 11:30. I was so accustomed to the structure and management from school leaders and district calendars that I didn't know how to adapt.

In my former position, when visitors from other schools or the state were on site, I walked classrooms with the school leadership team. But I only answered questions if they were directly asked of me. In the same way that many students never speak in class without

raising their hands, I never said anything without the go-ahead from my principal. Then, within my first few weeks at my new corporate job, I participated in a virtual call with expert education author Sue Brookhart, the CEO, and the content team. I really wanted to contribute to the conversation, but I wasn't sure if I was allowed to. At one point, I tentatively asked, "Can I say something?"

"Of course, Sara," my boss said. He sounded slightly annoyed. Had I done something wrong? But after the call, he stopped at my desk. "You know you don't need permission to speak, right?" he said. "We *hired* you to contribute. That's what I expect you to do."

Well, once I knew my expectations—I never shut up!

At first, I was nervous with all this autonomy. But eventually, as I got more comfortable in my new role, I felt valued. I was responsible for myself and my success. When I knew I was completely in charge of my own work, when I truly owned the work, I felt like a different person.

Two years later, I'm a member of the Applied Research Center, where we work in the field with real teachers facing real challenges. Our team works with teachers across the nation to innovate groundbreaking techniques for student teaming, formative assessment, and practical instructional techniques. I support teachers who use daily data in their professional learning communities (PLCs) to inform instructional decisions that make an immediate impact in their classrooms. I am embedded in this work, but I never lose sight of what it was like to be thrown into an unstructured work world unprepared. And I know now that, as teachers and school administrators, the best thing we can do for our students, the most important gift we can give them, is to prepare them to be autonomous, fully accountable problem solvers, people who are adept at collaborating with others, who can think critically and creatively, and who are able to manage their projects efficiently with minimal oversight from supervisors. These are the skills the workforce requires in the twenty-first century.

Meeting with teachers is a constant reminder of the struggle they have with implementing change and developing a sense of autonomy.

Schools often mandate programs and curricula, and teachers may feel they don't have much voice or choice. Teachers struggle with releasing ownership of the learning to students because oftentimes ownership was never released to them.

What does all this have to do with teaming in the classroom? As we will discuss in chapter 1, teaming, when done effectively (and we are going to help you do it effectively), builds exactly the skills students need to succeed in college, life, and the workplace of the future. These skills include the soft social/emotional skills (resilience, empathy, grit, self-confidence, listening, and speaking) as well as the knowledge and critical and creative thinking capacity that employers are desperately seeking.

What Skills Do Employers Look For?

The NACE Center for Career Development conducts annual surveys of US employers to learn what skills they are seeking in new hires. Their 2016 *Job Outlook Survey* found that employers are “looking for leaders who can work as part of a team. More than 80 percent of responding employers said they look for evidence of leadership skills on the candidate’s resume, and nearly as many seek out indications that the candidate is able to work in a team. Employers also cited written communication skills, problem-solving skills, verbal communication skills, and a strong work ethic as important candidate attributes” (NACE Center, 2016).

What’s in It for Teachers?

As we will discuss throughout this book, there are many benefits for students in classroom teaming. But organizing students to work in teams also yields rich rewards for teachers. When I first started teaching, I came home exhausted at the end of every day. Why was I so tired? Why was I losing my voice? I realize now that I was doing *all* the talking. We teachers thought our job was to dispense information and cover content. But when students collaborate and learn from each other, they *own* the learning. This positive interdependence is what makes teams strong and gives students the skills that

will put them ahead of the game when they enter the workforce. You will find that you will be doing a lot less of the heavy lifting in student learning as students begin to take on increased responsibility for their own progress toward goals. As you get more comfortable with teaming, you'll also see that you no longer need to *control* the classroom. You'll understand how much you benefit as a teacher from monitoring and listening to student conversations as a way to assess individual student progress. In many instances, when we insert ourselves, we actually interrupt the team's learning. Benefits of teaming for teachers include:

- Reduced need for interventions, or the ability to make interventions more focused
- More time to concentrate on planning rigorous lessons
- Potential reduction in the achievement gap, as struggling learners gain confidence and new skills in a team setting
- Renewed enthusiasm for your mission as a teacher
- Better relationships with students
- Reduction of misbehavior
- Confidence that you've prepared your students for the future

Let's be honest: every year teachers are asked to implement new initiatives. When I was a teacher, the state standards changed on me four times in ten years. But student teaming is *not* a new initiative that will fade away in a few years. It is the way of the future.

How This Book Is Organized

Student Teaming: You Got This! A Teacher's Survival Guide is not meant to be the definitive primer on student teaming. I have included a bit of the research and the rationale for student teaming in chapter 1, but chapters 2 to 5 are meant to be used as you need them, for quick-and-dirty on-the-spot help with student teaming. I hope that as you

begin to experiment with organizing students for teaming, you'll keep this book close for reference. You can flip to the chapters or sections you need to resolve issues or answer questions while you're in the middle of a lesson or planning your lessons.

This book is organized into broad categories. Chapter 2, "Challenges for Teachers," covers topics for self-reflection and planning. Chapters 3 to 6 address issues of behavior, academics, motivation, and personality. It's important to note at the outset that these categories are somewhat interconnected, since issues of behavior will certainly impact academics; motivation plays a big role in behavior; personality is impossible to separate from all three categories; and, of course, they all pose challenges for teachers. You'll develop an intuitive feel for how to weight these issues. You can find what you need by flipping to the appropriate sections and perhaps develop your own system to mark issues that tend to come up often.

Within chapters 3 to 6 I offer specific advice under the headings "What do I do if ...". For example, "What do I do if I have a student who is defiant?" or, "What do I do if I have a student who is unable to do the work?" Beneath these headings is listed a number of techniques to help resolve or alleviate the issue at hand. Each chapter also contains a desired outcome for the larger category (for example, the desired outcome for behavior of students working in teams) and reflection questions to help you think about and deepen your expertise in implementing student teams.

"Teachers have gone from 'Can kids learn this without me telling them how to do it?' to 'Let's see what they can tell me!' Since starting teaming, I have seen teachers and classrooms completely transform for the better."

—Sarah Sell, Instructional Coach, Grand Island, NE

The most important thing to remember, whether you are fairly new to student teaming in your classrooms or are familiar with this important method for organizing and supporting student learning, is

YOU GOT THIS!

that teaming can occasionally be a messy process. It requires teachers and students alike to cultivate a growth mindset, where risk taking is built into the process of learning, and where failure is a necessary stepping-stone on the way to success—not something to be avoided, but to be embraced. Again and again, teachers who have begun using student teams in their classrooms have told us that teaming is the best teaching decision they ever made. They tell us they would never go back to doing things the old way once they have seen how their students have flourished.

So dive right into teaming with confidence. The next chapter will help you lay the groundwork.

Teacher Self-Assessment Checklist

- Do you find yourself fighting frustration, or sometimes losing your temper in the classroom?
- Are you worried about losing control if you give your students more autonomy?
- Have you tried group work or teamwork but feel as though you need a little help?
- Do you leave work exhausted, from not only teaching, but constantly redirecting students?
- Do classroom management and/or behavior issues interfere with the learning?
- Are some students falling through the cracks while others are excelling?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, this book is for you. You have already taken the first step toward improving teaming in your classroom.