

Teaming Rocks!

Collaborate in Powerful Ways
to Ensure Student Success

By Jill Spencer



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Jill Invites You to Take a Look Back – and Find a Way Forward

“Can you teach maths?” I must have hesitated because the principal then asked me if I could balance my chequebook. There were low expectations for maths teachers in 1973! I was not going to admit that reconciling my bank statement with my chequebook was a very low priority, so I said yes! I looked around the table at the other 11 people (There really were a dozen educators present) quizzing me on why I thought I should be their choice for the Year 8 humanities and social sciences position. “What was I thinking?” kept bouncing around inside my brain as I looked from face to face. Although I knew very little about teaching, I had enjoyed my time in another school as the ed tech running the library. “How hard could it be to teach social sciences? I knew a lot about the subject,” I had mused when filling out the application. Going to the interview, I had expected to meet with the principal, not all of the teams looking for new teachers, so I left the interview in a bit of a daze. But that night the phone call came – I was hired!

That phone call planted the seed that grew into the passion I developed for middle years teaming. I understood the concept of making a large school more intimate by organising students into smaller groups. After all, the 3000-student secondary school I graduated from had been broken up into houses, and I had been in Barry House in Building 1. I had Mr Peterson for homeroom all three years, and for two years Mr Rosen was my maths teacher

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and Mr Warshaw, my English teacher. Was Newton High School looping in 1962? I don't know, but I do know that being part of a smaller community certainly helped me feel connected and less overwhelmed. Therefore, I was primed to be part of Team 8B and embark on what proved to be a grand educational adventure. We taught integrated units, team-taught lessons, flexed the schedule, grouped and regrouped students, integrated excursions into the curriculum and really knew and enjoyed our students. I learned something new every day about teaching from my teammates. Common planning time was energising as we crafted units and brainstormed ways to engage our students in learning. These early years convinced me that teaming was without a doubt the most effective way to meet young adolescents' learning needs.

When a new principal came on-board with an organisational vision that encompassed only departments for Years 7–12 and not teaming for the middle years, my Year 7 and 8 colleagues and I were crushed. Students began to fall through the proverbial cracks and got into trouble. It was now nearly impossible to maintain continuous communication about specific students because the only time we met was in the guidance office to address specific issues. We kept trying to recapture the essence of teaming by working with other year level teachers in our subject areas. We did some neat things, but those few activities could not replace the benefits that came from common planning time with others who share the same group of students. When we changed principals once again and teams were reinstated, my colleagues and I were thrilled.

Recently one of my teammates from those glory days asked me if middle level education was dead. He reported that in his school common planning time was greatly diminished and was spent in PET meetings and parent conferences. His team never planned curriculum together and rarely shared insights about student strengths and weaknesses. His story is just one of many such stories that I hear as I travel across the country consulting with schools. It feels like mass amnesia has taken hold, and the good reasons why schools for young adolescents were organised into teams in the first place have been forgotten. We often seem to completely ignore the research that shows students in schools that implemented the middle years concept

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and followed the recommendations in *Turning Points* (teaming, heterogeneous grouping, common planning time at least four times a week, homeroom, challenging curriculum and developmentally appropriate instruction) achieve at higher levels than students in schools without these conditions.

Particularly disturbing is that fewer and fewer year level teams are using whatever common planning time they still have to collaborate and devise ways to effectively apply best practice and research to benefit their students. Under the gun of “accountability as measured by test scores” I believe too many schools have given up on teaming even though it is the best way to achieve those mandated scores and also meet additional goals currently being neglected.

This diminished vision of teaming directly affects students in many ways. Instead of intellectually stimulating curriculum that teaches skills in authentic contexts, teams are following scripted instruction. With layer upon layer of programs deemed to be “teacher proof” and the proverbial panaceas for learning problems moved into place, no longer does an energised teaching staff act in innovative ways to solve these problems. Alas, too many schools have lost sight of the fact that teams are on the ground floor with their students and have the opportunity to size up their needs and respond in a timely fashion. What really distresses me is that this turning away from true teaming comes now when teams have the potential to be even more effective than in the past. They can apply knowledge about brain development and its processes that didn’t exist 30 years ago to their instructional practices and take advantage of the flexibility and endless resources that new technology devices and the internet provide. Too many schools are not taking advantage of the potential of teams to meet students’ learning needs through the combined power of technology tools and new learning research.

A curriculum coordinator recently told me about her perception that teachers talk about common planning time in ways that benefit only them; she didn’t hear them say anything about the benefits for students. That perception was one reason for her recommendation that teams be disbanded. I wanted to cry. So that very day I decided to write this book. I wanted to help unleash the hidden potential that resides in teams who are committed to making sure each and every

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one of their students soars to academic and personal heights. My purpose is not to explain how or why to establish teams. Many fine books such as *Implementing and Improving Teaming: A Handbook for Middle Level Leaders* (1996), *We Gain More Than We Give: Teaming in Middle Schools* (1997) and *WOW What A Team!* (2001) already fulfil that purpose. *Teaming Rocks! Collaborate in Powerful Ways to Ensure Student Success* is for existing teams who are ready to explore ways to collaborate more fully in building the skills and confidence students need to succeed in later education and life.

Writing this book in an informal, personal style as a classroom teacher, I hope to contribute to what I envision as the renaissance of middle years teaming. I want to see teaming not just return to the practices of the past before they were dismantled by high-stakes testing, teacher-proof curriculum and punitive measures for underachieving schools, but to evolve to an even higher level of effectiveness that is reflective of current research, technology and current challenges. Teaming is the proven vehicle for carrying out an intellectually stimulating 21st century curriculum that incorporates literacy, numeracy, digital fluency, and critical and creative thinking, all of which are possible when a team of teachers collaborate as true professionals.

The reader will notice that I make some assumptions about existing teams. I write as if teams have four teachers, each responsible for a specific curriculum area, as they most commonly are, and that they have some common planning time. Of course there are wonderful teams across the world that are organised differently, including those that teach in a totally integrated fashion and, regrettably, there are still some with virtually no common planning time. I suggest, too, that homeroom is a possible time for implementing several proposed ideas although not all teams have a formal homeroom. Middle years teachers who have to live by the notion of flexibility will not have difficulty figuring out how they can apply ideas from *Teaming Rocks!* to their own situations.

I hope this book sparks spirited discussions within schools and that teams assess where they are as a collaborative teaching team and adapt some of my ideas and strategies. I believe it is important to build effective, strong teams that continuously strive to improve their practice, but I want to stress that I'm not offering a recipe or a

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checklist for what teams should do. Each school's situation is unique, and the teams within the school must consider and reflect on their students' needs and take appropriate steps to continue to move forward. It is important work because teams save students' lives and inspire young adolescents to learn, achieve and follow their dreams. It is my fervent wish that *Teaming Rocks!* be simply a small contributor to discussions and actions that will make teaming what it should be, can be and what it always has been, the heart and soul of the school. *Let's Rock!*

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Become a Team That Inspires Your Students

Teams have the power to create an environment that motivates students to soar academically and personally. Effective teaming takes time and effort, but the rewards for both students and teachers are immeasurable.

Reaching the Heights

The drizzle stopped as the school buses pulled in the car park for the Precipice Trail that snaked its way up the east side of Champlain Mountain in Acadia National Park. Shifting their school bags and pulling off rain gear they would leave behind, 80 Year 8 students tumbled out of the buses. Craning their necks, they stared up at the mountain. "Are we really going up there?" whispered Jillian. "I'm worried about having to creep along that narrow trail that we've heard about."

Jillian was not particularly athletic but felt comfortable sharing her fears because the team had developed such an esprit de corps and "can do" attitude over the year. She and her classmates had worked together on a variety of projects and learned to push themselves. With support from both her teachers and her classmates, Jillian had taken on roles she never had thought she was capable of – including organising an excursion for her class to a local organic farm to study sustainable agriculture. She also had performed her own original poetry for a class podcast. She thought to herself, "How much scarier can it be to climb a mountain than to read your own poem into a microphone that will allow anyone in the whole wide world to hear it?"

Two hundred metres up the 300-metre seemingly vertical trail had Jillian rethinking her prior bravado. The trail was slippery from the morning drizzle, very narrow and seemed to drop off into nothing. She hesitated as she approached a curve in the trail where she knew she had to hug the cliff to get around the curve. Dan encouraged her from behind, "Just don't look down and you'll be all right." Of course, she looked down and then swallowed hard. She began to edge further up and around the twist in the trail. Her best friend, Libby, was urging her on from just ahead. "There." She had made it and sighed as her heart beat rapidly.

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The group continued climbing until all had reached the summit. With a sense of satisfaction and pride, they looked out over Mt Desert Island and Frenchman's Bay. Everyone had made it to the top together. This outing was the culmination of their year, celebrating not only the completion of the rigorous semester, but also the students' growth as individuals able to face all types of challenges and as a cohesive team that had learned the value of collaboration and respect.

Over and over the stories one reads of individuals who have succeeded are highlighted by the role of mentors, support systems and special experiences that inspired these individuals to make life-altering decisions. Middle years teams are in the perfect position to provide meaningful experiences that will shape their students' lives in significant ways. Working together as a team committed to crafting inspirational and meaningful learning experiences for their students provides teachers with a sense of professional accomplishment. Also, parents are pleased when their children respond positively to their school experiences during the often-turbulent adolescent years.

Create extraordinary learning environments for students because:

- **The middle years are particularly vulnerable times for students as they undergo extensive changes and make decisions that will affect their emotional and physical health as well as their education and career options as adults.** "Young people undergo more rapid and profound personal changes between the ages of 10 and 15 than at any other time in their lives" (NMSA, 2010, p.5). Young adolescents are both a challenging and exhilarating group of youngsters to teach. Educators need innovative thinking, patience, flexibility and a solid grounding in pedagogy and curriculum to address the learning needs of this often-at-risk age group. It is an ethical and economic imperative that students leave the middle years with the competence and confidence they need to face their next set of challenges. Students' achievements and behaviours formed in the middle years strongly influence their tertiary-level education and career readiness as well as the probability of their dropping out of school (ACT, 2009; Balfanz, 2009). Teams that share ideas and work collaboratively are in the best position to build