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Increasing Equity and Achievement by Empowering Students

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*How school boards can help shape a new vision for instruction
where students take an active role in their learning and build
the skills to mitigate effects of the opportunity gap*

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““ *What if students ceased being passive receptacles of conveyed information and instead learned, in collaboration with their peers, to be engineers of their own learning?* ””

– Carol Ann Tomlinson, foreword to *The Power of Student Teams: Achieving Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Learning in Every Classroom Through Academic Teaming*

The Student’s Traditional Role in the Classroom: Passive

When students have a passive role in the classroom, it can be difficult for them to engage in their learning and develop the skills and sense of empowerment to better their lives. Gallup’s various studies spanning more than 5 million student surveys across every state in rural, suburban, and urban schools unearth a concerning statistic: 53% of students surveyed are “not engaged” or “actively disengaged” (Gallup, 2018). Yet, there is a strong relationship between engagement and achievement. Another Gallup study of more than 113,000 students in grades five through 12 showed a significantly positive relationship between student engagement and student academic performance (Gallup, 2019). What causes students to be passive and disengaged in the classroom?

Learning Sciences International’s (LSI) Applied Research Center has observed classrooms across the country and typically finds the same pattern of teacher-centered instruction comprised predominately of lecture and independent practice activities. In these classrooms, the traditional role of the student is passively compliant with few opportunities to interact with their peers (see figure 1). The students’ role is to listen, focus, and

not distract or bother their peers as the teacher delivers direct instruction. Students may be seated in superficial groups but work independently. When peer group interactions do occur, they are often at best occasional, unstructured, and heavily directed by the teacher. How can we create a vision for instruction where students can meaningfully engage with their peers and have a more active role in their own learning?

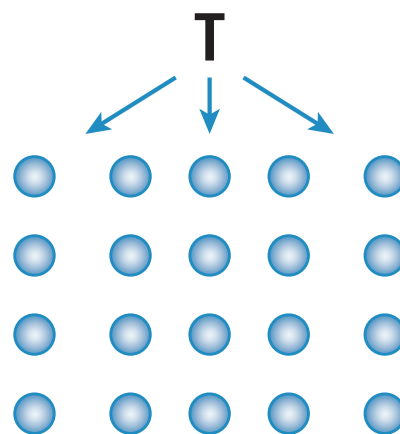


Figure 1. In a teacher-centered classroom, the teacher’s role is more active, and the student’s role is more passive (Toth & Sousa, 2019, p. 22).

Empowering Students with an Active Role Through Academic Teaming

Student empowerment requires a fundamental altering of the traditional roles of the teacher and student. A new model of instruction called **student-led academic teaming** is well-suited to creating an active role for students. The teacher provides the structures and opportunities for students to collaborate and exercise leadership with their peers in academic teams so students can develop increased ownership and accountability, resulting in higher engagement, and eventually, true empowerment.

Student-led academic teaming involves students organized into diverse, small groups with stable membership, roles, norms, resources, and rigorous learning targets and success criteria for all learning tasks (See Figure 2). While the teacher still provides foundational knowledge in an academic teaming classroom, most of the daily lesson time (50%-70%) is spent with students working in their teams. The teacher tracks student learning and intervenes only when necessary. Students can begin regulating their learning and behavior with the team structures in place. Students' ability to self-regulate is positively correlated to academic achievement (Hinnant-Crawford, Faison, and Chang, 2018). Furthermore, PET scans of children's brains show that when students explain what they are learning to someone else, their brains experience significantly increased activity as compared to when they are just listening (Toth & Sousa, 2019).

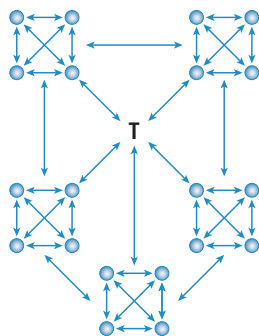


Figure 2. In student-led academic teams, students have an active role and become interdependent rather than dependent on the teacher for support (Toth & Sousa, 2019, p. 26).

Developing SEL and Equity in Academic Teams

Student-led academic teaming is designed to integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) and equity and access into core instruction, rather than treating these priorities separately. According to a 2019 survey by the Education Week Research Center, the number one challenge teachers face in supporting students' social-emotional development in the classroom is that focusing on academic content leaves them with little time for SEL. But the most effective way to harness the power of SEL is to embed it into daily classroom instruction along with rigorous academic learning, rather than setting aside time to teach SEL concepts separately.

When all students have daily access to an education that develops key skills employers demand—such as effective communication skills, empathy, and the ability to strategize with a team—equity increases as both achievement gaps and skills gaps close. Students become empowered with the skills to mitigate the effects of opportunity gaps. Studies have shown that organizing students in small collaborative groups creates opportunities for interaction that lead to improved cognitive learning. This way of organizing groups is particularly beneficial for students with minority backgrounds and students with disabilities (Valls & Kyriakides, 2013).

What does SEL look like in academic teaming classrooms? Students wrestle with different ideas in their teams and push each other towards deeper thinking as they try to come up with a solution without the teacher's help. The teams have guiding norms, including SEL protocols, so they can deal on their own with issues such as team members arguing, going off task, or not contributing equally. Students experience bonding and develop empathy and care in their teams because the level of cognitive rigor in the task necessitates that they rely on one another and coach each other through academic struggles.

Students learn to work with others who may be different from themselves and support those

who are struggling in certain areas, while also learning to accept support from others. Student-led academic teaming opens access and equity in core instruction for every student, including reluctant learners, English learners, and those with disabilities. These students likely would not have access to the same level of rigorous instruction if they were pulled into interventions or made to work in isolation on individual tasks.

In LSI’s Applied Research Center interviews, many teachers have said that when they see all students successfully tackling challenging team tasks, their expectations become even higher. They have seen evidence that every student can achieve rigorous academic standards with their teams. In this way, SEL and equity are integrated across all content levels and in all grade levels in academic teams.

Case Studies: School and District Success with Academic Teaming

*William D. Moseley Elementary School
Putnam County, Florida*

Student-led academic teaming has the potential to empower even the most vulnerable learners. William D. Moseley Elementary School in Putnam County, Florida, is a historically low-performing rural school where 100% of students are eligible for free and reduced-price meals, 25% receive special education services, and the majority (more than 80%) are of color. The Putnam County School Board, a member of the Florida School Boards Association (FSBA), worked with the district and LSI to create a vision for school improvement through academic teaming. It would not only help Moseley exit turnaround status but also would set the school

Moseley’s Achievement Scores

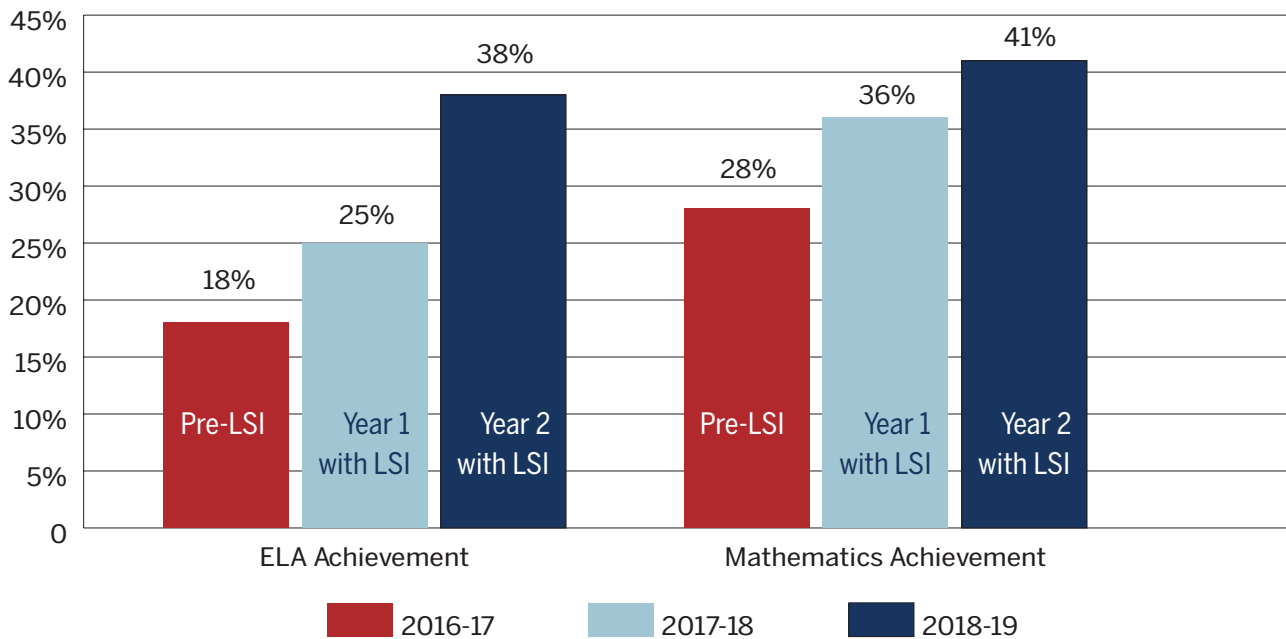


Figure 3. Achievement scores increased after William D. Moseley Elementary School committed to implementing student-led academic teaming schoolwide.

ESSA Subgroups Scoring Below Federal Target 2017-18	ESSA Subgroups Scoring Below Federal Target 2018-19
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students with Disabilities 2. Economically Disadvantaged 3. Black 4. Hispanic 	None

Figure 4. All student subgroups at William D. Moseley achieved their academic target after the school adopted academic teaming.

on the pathway to becoming a model school for others to learn from. The school board believed in this bold vision for Moseley’s success, the districtwide benefits that would follow, and LSI’s ability to help make the vision a reality with intensive support and sustainable systems.

Moseley committed to creating a learning environment that reflects the diversity of its students, transforming instruction from teacher-centered to student-led academic teams schoolwide over two years. Many of the students who previously had been reluctant learners blossomed when they became part of a team. Moseley went from being the fifth-lowest performing traditional public school in Florida to increasing student proficiency on the Florida Standards Assessment (FSA) by 20% in English language arts and by 13% in mathematics (See Figure 3). The school rose from an “F” to a “C” letter grade in Florida’s accountability system (Learning Sciences International, 2019).

Moseley made great strides in equity for student subgroups in its second year. The school went from having four ESSA subgroups missing the federal target (scoring below 41%) to having no ESSA subgroups missing the target (see Figure 4). Andrea Messina, FSBA Executive Director, notes that “It has been a very motivating improvement, not just for this school but for the district. After seeing the successes at Moseley Elementary School, the board has been able to capitalize

on lessons learned and bring processes and techniques to other schools across the district.”

Throughout Moseley’s transformative process, the Putnam County School Board set high expectations. The board was involved in the turnaround work by attending workshops and presentations at the school, participating in community meetings and celebrations for Moseley, and engaging in return-on-investment conversations on a continuing basis.

*Des Moines Public Schools
Des Moines, Iowa*

Des Moines Public Schools, a member of the Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB), is a large urban district of 64 schools where more than one in five students is an English learner. The city of Des Moines is a refugee resettlement community, and over 100 languages are spoken (Toth & Sousa, 2019). “The Des Moines Public Schools pursues equity as central to its core mission. Serving a community rich in diversity, the district is guided by clear equity beliefs of the school board. Professional growth for the staff, and strong engagement strategies for the families and community, are foundations to help students grow. The district seeks partners such as LSI to help identify and implement new strategies with a sustained focus,” notes Lisa Bartusek, IASB Executive Director.

Des Moines Public Schools partnered with LSI in 2016 to begin the implementation of academic teaming through a schoolwide initiative called Schools for Rigor. The school board approved the

expenditure of funds for the initiative and was supportive throughout the process. Academic teaming was a perfect fit for the board's Belief Statement, which says in part: "We believe in every child and, no matter their circumstance, will support them in achieving at their highest level. DMPS will work to ensure our students are career and post-secondary education ready, that they possess the knowledge and skills to be self-directed and autonomous, and they have world awareness with exposure to languages and cultures of the world" (Des Moines Public Schools, n.d.-a).

This statement aligns well with the academic teaming vision for instruction, where students develop self-direction, autonomy, and other college- and career-ready skills in teams. They also have the opportunity to work closely with and develop empathy for their peers from all cultural backgrounds. With the board's support, the district began to implement academic teaming with six schools the first year, adding 16 more schools in the second year, and seven more schools in the third year.

LSI's Applied Research Center conducted a 10,000-student multi-year study comparing students in schools implementing academic teaming matched against control students in the district using the federal What Works Clearinghouse Design Standards. The study found that students at all schools where academic teaming was implemented experienced statistically significant improvements in reading and mathematics achievement compared to students at matched control schools, with up to 37% improvement in reading and up to 26% improvement in mathematics.

Of particular interest is how academic teaming impacted students who had achievement gaps. Black students, students with disabilities, and English learners all saw achievement gaps close by 4% to 7% in one year. The associate superintendent of Des Moines Public Schools said, "Schools for Rigor fosters inclusiveness—instead of ELL or special education students being pulled out into isolation, these students are able to work in their academic teams within mainstream classrooms" (Basileo,

2018). This improvement in achievement gaps is especially significant given that Black males have the lowest rates of achievement in the district, and the school board made a commitment to analyze its goals "through the focus lens of Black male achievement" (Des Moines Public Schools, n.d.-b). Data reports from schools participating in Schools for Rigor were useful tools the board could review to better understand improvements and potential barriers and support the schools' progress.

How Can School Boards Support Academic Teaming Implementation?

- 1. Promote the vision:** Schools boards can adopt a bold new vision for equitable instruction through student-led academic teaming. Boards can recognize and communicate the importance of not only raising student achievement but also teaching the whole child by integrating SEL into academics with students empowered to lead their own and their peers' learning. Boards likely will find alignment between their belief statements and academic teaming (see the Des Moines Public Schools example). They can focus on how their new vision helps guide them to achieve goals they have already committed to, rather than feeling like they are taking on something new. School boards then can create coherence between the vision for instruction and the strategic plan for the district to ensure alignment. This allows for a strategic filter to ask for each major decision: How does this advance our vision for instruction?
- 2. Share with the community:** School boards should ensure the district has a well-developed communication plan for explaining the new vision for instruction to parents and other stakeholders. Parents will want to understand why the traditional instructional methods they are familiar with are shifting and how the shift to academic teaming will benefit their children. The board should support school and district leaders to prepare for commonly asked questions. They should create a plan for articulating how academic teaming builds skills for students to take on more

responsibility in and out of the classroom and ultimately launch into a successful future with the competencies needed for new economy jobs.

- 3. Set high expectations for all schools:** School boards should recognize that even historically low-performing schools in the district can become demonstration schools (as in the case of William D. Moseley Elementary School). How a school improves matters. Too often, methods for school improvement focus on overcontrolling students' behavior and teachers' pedagogy without regard to the

negative impact on school culture. Academic teaming empowers both students and teachers with a methodology where they have voice and choice. It also provides accountability structures to hold students and teachers to high standards for achievement and SEL development. School boards should expect the transformation to take time but understand that with the right systems in place, every school is capable of annual improvement through rigorous instruction and academic teaming.

Resources

- [AcademicTeaming.com](#): Free resources for Academic Teaming expertise including videos of teaming in action, author commentary, case studies, and more.
- [The Power of Student Teams: Achieving Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Learning in Every Classroom Through Academic Teaming](#), by Michael D. Toth and David A. Sousa: The founding book on academic teaming, including the neuroscience research, enabling conditions, and leadership practices behind successful student teaming implementation.
- [Moseley Elementary: From an “F” School to a Place Where all Students Thrive](#): The full case study on Moseley’s success with implementing academic teaming in Putnam County.
- [How a Great City School District is Improving Student Achievement, Increasing Equity and Closing Achievement Gaps](#): The full research report detailing the 10,000-student matched control study of academic teaming in Des Moines Public Schools.
- [Video: Autonomous Learning Teams in Action](#)
- [Video: How Does Academic Teaming Engage Reluctant Learners?](#)
- [Video: 21st Century Skills and Teaming in an AP Classroom](#)
- [Video: Academic Teaming with English Language Learners and Special Education Students](#)

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The National School Boards Association (NSBA) is the leading advocate for public education. For 80 years, we have been leading the effort to support and enhance public education. We are succeeding in creating the best possible environment in which students can realize their dreams.

NSBA is a federation of 49 state associations and the U.S. territory of the Virgin Islands, representing their more than 90,000 school board officials. These local officials govern more than 13,600 local school districts serving more than 50 million public school students. Working with and through our state associations, and serving as their Washington, D.C., office, NSBA advocates for equity and excellence in public education through school board governance.

We believe public education is America's most vital institution. It is a civil right necessary to the dignity and freedom of the American people, and all children deserve equal access to an education that allows them to reach their potential.

In pursuit of these beliefs, NSBA and our members will continue to lead the national conversation about public education, advocate for public policies that ensure all students everywhere have access to a great public education where they live, create a better understanding of the importance of school boards and the benefits of local governance, and enhance the effectiveness of school boards.



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