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# The School Planning and Management Team

*The Engine That Drives the School*

Miriam McLaughlin, Everol Ennis, and Fred Hernández

*Because the faithful implementation of the School Planning and Management Team (SPMT) model is critical to the success of the Comer Process in any school, it is essential that all aspects of the SPMT's purpose, organization, and functioning be well understood by the entire school community. In this chapter, a member of the School Development Program's (SDP) national faculty, an implementation coordinator at the national office of SDP, and a principal describe the SPMT's responsibilities and constituency groups. They map out the first steps in starting an SPMT, and provide rich details about the process of doing the team's work.*

**T**he School Planning and Management Team (SPMT) is the lead decision-making and planning body of the school. Team members work to build a community where all members have a voice in the decision-making process. Being the school's central team, the SPMT must set the tone for all other teams and the entire school. Its members must be in accord, and their work should be characterized by a positive climate and the spirit of no-fault.

The role of the School Planning and Management Team is not to direct people's actions but to make sure people's actions have direction.

—Fred Hernández, principal

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## SPMT RESPONSIBILITIES

The SPMT has numerous responsibilities, most of which fit into one of the following categories:

- improving curriculum and instruction
- improving students' psychosocial functioning
- improving social relations among adults, among students, and between adults and students
- establishing policy guidelines for school programs
- responding to school concerns either directly or by delegating the response to a subcommittee that will report back to appropriate persons and groups
- carrying out systematic school planning
- creating effective programs for staff development, parent training, academics, social climate, and public relations
- planning an annual school calendar that integrates social, academic, and staff development functions
- monitoring and evaluating the Comprehensive School Plan and all school programs
- promoting effective resource utilization, coordination, and program implementation

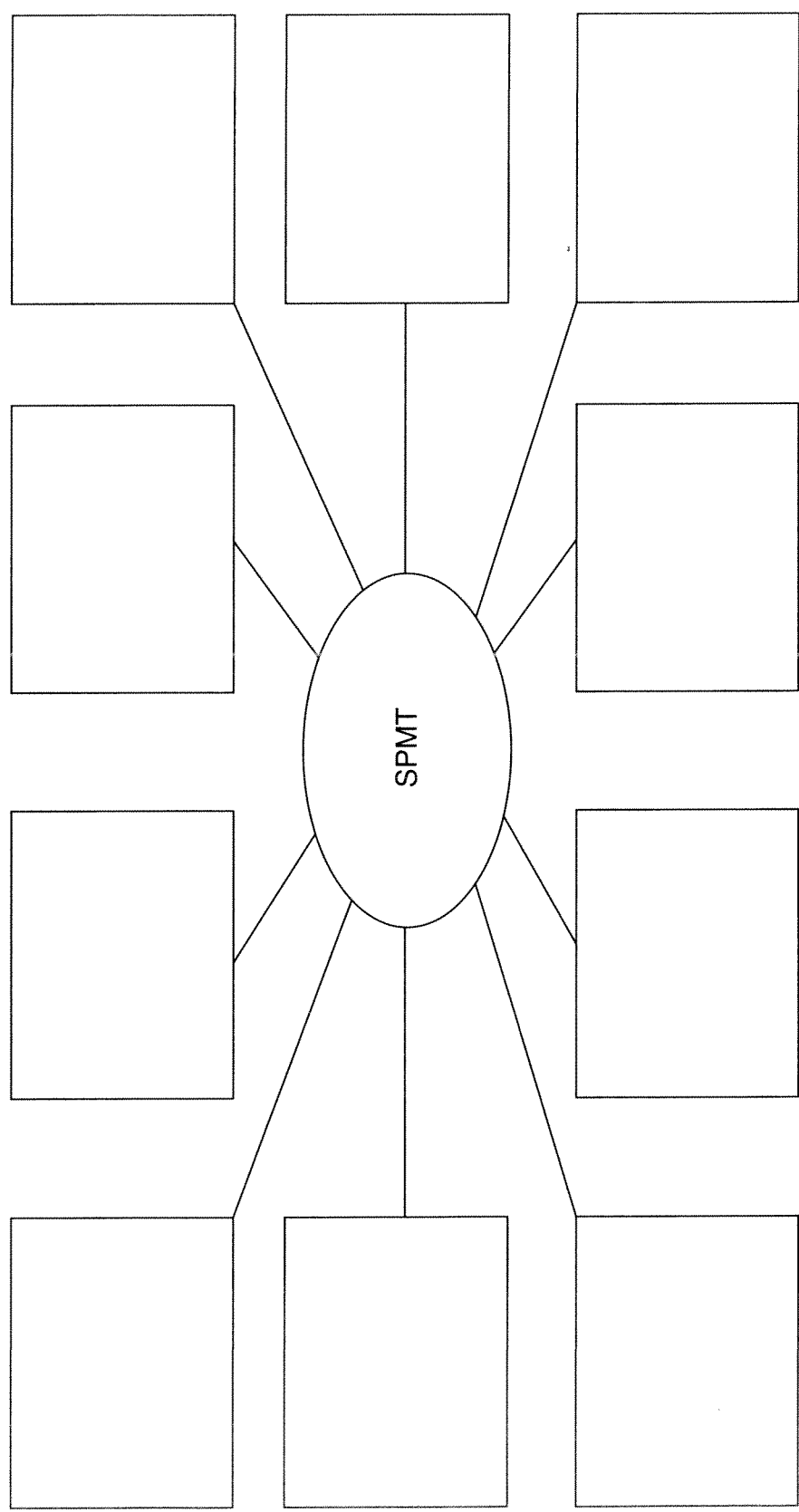
The SPMT is responsible for coordinating and aligning the activities of the school based on the Comprehensive School Plan to ensure consistency and the equitable distribution of resources. The team should demonstrate a strong academic focus in planning, based on child and adolescent development principles and a child-development-centered agenda. Figure 3.1 shows how these responsibilities are related to the team's developmental stages.

**Figure 3.1** Developmental stages of a School Planning and Management Team

Stage	Major Theme	Dependent On
<b>One</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusion</li> <li>• Process orientation</li> <li>• Engagement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whole-school community awareness</li> <li>• Open leadership style</li> <li>• Creation of initial successes</li> </ul>
<b>Two</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordination and alignment of all school activities</li> <li>• Joint problem solving</li> <li>• Greater authority sharing</li> <li>• Initiation of child-centered planning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School community buy-in</li> <li>• Skills in group interaction</li> <li>• Collaborative leadership style</li> <li>• Skills in discerning important patterns from data</li> <li>• User-friendly data</li> <li>• Knowledge of developmental pathways</li> </ul>
<b>Three</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of a child-centered agenda</li> <li>• Reflection on teaching and learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowing students well across developmental pathways</li> <li>• Strong global Student and Staff Support Team</li> <li>• Strong parent views</li> <li>• Strong instructional leadership</li> </ul>

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Figure 3.2 Template depicting constituency groups



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## CONSTITUENCY GROUPS

To keep the business of the school achievable, the SPMT must be manageable and inclusive of those members who have a stake in the students' success. The SPMT should not be so large that meetings are difficult to run and not so small that certain groups of the school community are left out. In addition, the SPMT should have members who are dedicated to the school's mission and vision and do not divert or subvert the SPMT with hidden personal agendas. The SPMT is made up of representatives of all parts of the school community. *This inclusiveness is what makes the SPMT different from the management teams found in most schools.* Another distinction is that the SPMT uses the six developmental pathways as a framework for developing programs and activities for students. Through the SPMT, administrators, parents, teachers, and other professionals, such as subject specialists and health and guidance staff, noninstructional staff, members of the community, and in some cases, students, play significant roles in the management of the school (see Figure 3.2 for a template of how to graphically depict constituency groups). Figure 3.3 lists the constituency groups that are the irreducible core of any SPMT.

### Administrators

Another characteristic of the SPMT that differs from traditional management teams is the sharing of leadership. In all schools, principals hold leadership and decision-making roles. When they are working with an SPMT, their challenge is to ensure that the school meets all requirements and mandates of the district and state offices, while they share the leadership of the school and collaborate with other members of the SPMT. Despite being a key team member, a principal should not serve as chair of the SPMT. It does not help to foster the notion of collaboration or shared leadership if the leader of the building is also the leader of the meeting of the lead team in the building. The principal works with the chairperson of the SPMT

**Figure 3.3** Checklist of SPMT constituency groups

<input type="checkbox"/>	Administrative team (One member must be the school principal.)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Teachers (grade level—early childhood, primary, intermediate, special subject areas, special education, etc.)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Noninstructional support staff (custodial and cafeteria workers, school secretary, attendance aides, education aides, etc.)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Parents from organized parent group in school (The parent must have a child in the school.)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Parent from an underrepresented group of parents as selected by the principal (The parent must have a child in the school.)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Representative from the Student and Staff Support Team
<input type="checkbox"/>	Community leaders and business partners
<input type="checkbox"/>	Students (optional for elementary schools)

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and the Comer facilitator to build the agenda before each meeting. Most effective administrators arrange to have some time on the agenda allotted to their business; the rest of the time, their role is to be an involved participant on the team. (It can be very frustrating to other team members when the SPMT meeting serves as the principal's meeting for the entire time allotted. If this occurs, a postmeeting debriefing session to assess how the SPMT performed is one means of addressing the team process.)

### **Instructional Staff**

All instructional staff should have representation on the SPMT. Delegates may come from grade-level teams, special subject area teams, and subcommittees. Thus, they can bring their concerns and needs from the smaller group to the larger team and have a voice in the management of the school. In return, they are expected to bring the larger management issues that are being raised back to their constituent group or team. This linkage is most effective when the representatives (1) have regular contact with the teachers at their grade-level or other meetings, (2) report regularly on the discussions and considerations taking place in the SPMT, and (3) are efficient about bringing concerns, needs, and ideas of the teachers to the SPMT meetings—exclusive of personal issues. Making minutes of the SPMT meetings available in a timely manner is also important in assuring that teachers feel they have a voice in the management of the school. If the school does not have the resources to make minutes available to everyone, a copy of minutes can be placed in a centrally located area (e.g., the main office). It is important that this copy be easily accessible to all members of the school community.

### **Noninstructional Staff**

As indicated above, all members of the school community must be involved in the decision making in the school. Perhaps one of the most important constituency groups, and one often overlooked, is the noninstructional support staff. Custodians, cafeteria workers, clerical, and support staff have a unique view of the school and the students and can be valuable contributors to the management team. To ensure their representation, it is often necessary to form a noninstructional staff subcommittee that has established meeting times and that chooses a representative to the SPMT. The school-based facilitator is present at the noninstructional staff subcommittee meetings, as his or her schedule permits, to lend support. Consideration must be given to the often diverse work schedules of this group and their availability for meetings.

### **Parents**

The Parent Team (PT), PTA/PTO, and similar parent groups are usually accustomed to school involvement, and it is not difficult to get representation on the SPMT from these groups. These parent organizations play an important role in the life of the school. They are frequently already collaborating on the school calendar, and they often have access to funds that can support SPMT projects. However, bake sales and fund raising are not enough. Parents on the SPMT must be positioned to help the school community move forward in meeting its social and academic goals for the students. Their delegate to the SPMT is an important link to many of the school's families.

Much more challenging is reaching parents from underrepresented groups in the school community. These parents are more likely to be uncomfortable about being involved in the business of the school. They may have had unpleasant experiences in school themselves or have limited knowledge of the education process. One way

schools are successful in involving the uninvolved parents is to identify a parent liaison who is representative of a particular socioeconomic or ethnic group. This individual

The professional community tends to overlook the tremendous resource parents can be.

—Fred Hernández, principal

is an employee of the school who is accessible to parents, often meeting with them in their homes. Through these contacts, parents are identified who are able and willing to attend SPMT meetings. Also, administrators and teachers can work together to identify and seek out parents they think would be willing to serve. Frequently,

schools will start by implementing a PT. A parent representative is then selected from that team to serve on the SPMT.

### **Student and Staff Support Team**

The Student and Staff Support Team (SSST) also provides leadership in the Comer Process. This team deals with the needs of individual students and works to identify global school issues or trends. The job of the SSST is to intervene for the well-being of students and the well-being of the school. Its representative brings to the SPMT problems the SSST has identified and its recommendations for prevention.

### **Community Partners**

Many schools are fortunate to have community partners. These are businesses, universities, and organizations (civic, private, religious, etc.) that take an active interest in the life of the school. They are sometimes financial contributors, and often encourage their employees to serve as mentors for students who need extra help or support. These partners may offer free merchandise, goods, or services for school events. In addition, a university department that is collaborating with the school may provide students and teaching staff. Schools that have such partnerships should include representatives from these organizations on the SPMT. They are important contacts to the community and its resources. It is important that the best interests of children remain the overriding reason for participation.

### **Students**

Student participation on the SPMT is optional for elementary schools. Some

We encourage all schools to establish a Comer Kids' Council. The purpose of the Comer Kids' Council is to promote leadership among the students in the school. Schools can turn their current student government associations into Comer Kids' Councils in the same way that schools may modify their preexisting leadership teams under the guidance of the Comer Process. (See "Proud to Be a Comer Kid," in Chapter 5 of *Six Pathways to Healthy Child Development and Academic Success: The Field Guide to Comer Schools in Action* in this series.)

SPMTs invite elementary school students to participate in discussions on specific topics or be part of planning for special events. When student councils or student government organizations (SGOs) are in place in an elementary school, they should be informed of the role of the SPMT and of any opportunities SGO members may have to participate in meetings. Middle and high school students, however, should routinely be involved to some degree on the SPMT. Student government should be kept informed of the activities of the SPMT, even when meeting times and school activities prohibit students' regular attendance at SPMT meetings. Bear in mind that an SGO is only one

means of selecting a student representative to the SPMT. There may be other students who are qualified to serve and are not members of an SGO. The goal is to ensure a link between the SPMT and the student body.

## FIRST STEPS IN STARTING AN SPMT

How does a school ensure that everyone in the school community is represented on the SPMT? Compare a list of potential constituency groups with a current SPMT membership list. Identify the SPMT member who represents each individual and group. Publicize that information to ensure that all members of the school community know who represents them. Please point out that anyone from the school community is welcome to attend an SPMT meeting, as it is a public forum. However, if visitors want to present issues, they must ask to be put on the agenda through their constituent group. If their constituent group is in agreement that the issue is an appropriate use of SPMT meeting time, then that issue is brought by their SPMT representative. Figure 3.4 offers an exercise through which SPMTs can assess whether they are appropriately inclusive.

The first steps an SPMT should take include the following:

1. Determine who will serve on the team and for how long.
2. Decide on meeting dates and times for the year. Place these dates on your master calendar.
3. Know each other. Ongoing team building reinforces relationships and encourages best instructional practices.
4. Know your students. Create a large visual chart including the following:
  - neighborhood demographics
  - student demographics
  - test data
  - attendance data
  - referral data
  - developmental data
  - climate data
  - other information about students
5. Know what you already do. Create a large visual chart that includes the following:
  - all current teams
  - all current subcommittees
  - all current programs
  - all instructional initiatives
6. Assess your school program. Identify
  - current strengths
  - current weaknesses
  - what can be cut back or eliminated (through a decision-making process based on consensus)
  - the short-term and long-term priorities, based on your Comprehensive School Plan

**Figure 3.4** An example of how a school allocated SPMT membership

Staff Allocation	SPMT Membership
1 principal	principal
1 assistant principal	assistant principal
2 secretaries	librarian
1 nurse	Comer facilitator
1 librarian	PTA president
6 cafeteria workers	2 first-grade teachers
4 custodial engineers	1 third-grade teacher
1 guidance counselor	special education teacher
1 technology specialist	reading specialist
1 Comer facilitator	instructional specialist
1 parent facilitator	
<u>Teachers</u>	
5 kindergarten	
5 first	
5 second	
5 third	
3 fourth	
3 fifth	
1 reading specialist	
1 instructional specialist	
2 special education	
<u>Instructional Aides</u>	
5 kindergarten	
5 first	
<b>Questions</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does this school's SPMT include representation from all the key stakeholders in the building?</li> <li>• Who is missing?</li> <li>• Are any groups overrepresented?</li> <li>• How should SPMT members be selected?</li> <li>• How long should SPMT members serve?</li> </ul>	

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## GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER, THE STUDENTS, AND THE COMMUNITY

How well do members of your SPMT know each other? Team members must have relationships with one another in order to work productively as a team. Team building



is an important first step for an SPMT. Going on a retreat together is one of the most effective ways to promote relationships. However, team building should also be part of every agenda. It takes just a few minutes at the beginning of the meeting for people to check in with one another and reconnect.

To accomplish the tasks of the SPMT, including the development of the Comprehensive School Plan, members must know the students who are attending the school and the communities the school serves. In addition, SPMT members will want to look at what is already in place in the school in terms of current teams, programs, and instructional initiatives. This information will help the team identify strengths and gaps and will point the way to priorities for the school year.

## **STRUCTURING THE MEETINGS**

From the outset, it is important to have shared agreements about procedures, to stay on task, and to be clear about the expected attendance and tenure of the team members.

### **Shared Agreements**

Ask the team to work together to build a list of specific behaviors they can commit to that will help the team to work effectively. For example, starting and ending on time is important to all members of the team. That means team members will take responsibility for getting to the meetings on time and will stick to the agenda during discussions. Write shared agreements about these behaviors on chart paper (or something even more permanent) and post them on the wall during every meeting.

### **Staying on Task**

Time, topics, tasks, and roles of members are all important considerations when holding a meeting. Nothing is more frustrating to team members than unstructured meetings that do not accomplish what was intended, go on indefinitely, and pull team members in at the last minute to perform tasks for which they are unprepared. The end result of such meetings is an unwillingness on the part of staff, parents, and community members to serve on teams. We encourage the chair or facilitator to periodically check in with team members to ensure that the meeting is proceeding as planned.

### **Tenure on the Team**

The SPMT seeks volunteers or nominates people for specific roles on the team. These individuals usually keep their roles for at least two years, with half the team rotating off each year. If SPMT members serve only one-year terms, that puts the SPMT in the position of "starting from scratch" each school year. Ideally, team members should have three-year terms, so that only one-third of the team would change each year. This approach allows the SPMT to have continuity, while giving others in the school community opportunities to serve in leadership roles. Anything longer than three years could lead to burn-out or resentment by other staff members. In addition, if new staff members perceive the SPMT as the team that "doesn't like to share the leadership responsibilities," they may become discouraged about trying to become members.

## The Agenda

The agenda for the SPMT is developed jointly by the chairperson, the Comer facilitator, and the principal a week before the meeting, allowing ample time for members to propose any corrections or additions. All members of the SPMT can contribute agenda items during this time, as long as the issues are ones that have emerged from discussions in the constituent groups represented on the SPMT. An agenda item should never come from an individual, with the exception of a school community visitor who wishes to address the SPMT during the meeting. (The visitor's issues should be screened to determine if the SPMT should address the issue.) For example, an SPMT agenda item pertaining to the Parent Team should come from the parents on that team and not solely from the Parent Team representative on the SPMT. To make sure that the agenda items are appropriate, they should be discussed by committees and teams before they are submitted to the SPMT.

Contributors to the agenda are asked about the amount of time needed during the meeting to address their item, and time is assigned. The assigned amount of time for each agenda item should fit within the allotted time for the meeting. Agenda items that come in late or will extend the meeting over its allotted time should be moved to the next meeting. If urgent business arises, the agenda should be revisited and less urgent items moved to the next meeting's agenda. Adherence to the time allotted is critical to the success of the SPMT. The meetings often take place after school, and team members have personal responsibilities to tend to after the meeting. If the meeting runs for an unpredictable length of time, team members will leave or become less focused on business. Time is monitored by the timekeeper, who pays close attention to the times assigned to each agenda topic. If the members wish to continue a discussion beyond the time allotted, they can negotiate for additional minutes with the timekeeper and the rest of the SPMT using consensus decision making. Figure 3.5 offers a sample format that can be used for an SPMT agenda and for meeting minutes.

## Agenda Topics

The work of the SPMT is guided by the goals of the Comprehensive School Plan.

Appropriate discussion (for the SPMT) obviously has to do with curriculum items . . . and sharing data. For example, the perception on the fourth-grade English language arts test is that whatever the results are, the fourth-grade teachers are responsible for that. But looking at fourth-grade data and not looking at the data on kindergarten leading up to fourth (not seeing the whole picture) is not appropriate.

—Fred Hernández, principal

At least 75 percent of the meeting should focus on the Comprehensive School Plan. The team focuses on the academic and developmental needs of students, the professional growth and staff development needs of teachers, and the social climate of the school. Curriculum is a very important topic for the team to consider. It is critical that the team have comprehensive data regarding student performance in all subject areas to guide decision making. For example, if the team is considering a reading program for the primary grades, it should have (at a minimum) data on reading performance for students in those grades and at the higher grade levels.

The activities of the school are coordinated by the SPMT with input from all other teams and subcommittees. It is important that team members understand what is appropriate and what is inappropriate to discuss at team meetings. Discussion of

inappropriate topics can pull an SPMT from its purpose. The following issues are appropriate for discussion at an SPMT meeting:

- agenda items
- instruction and curriculum
- school social events
- public relations
- school climate and school environment

Issues concerning just a few members of the school community, individual students or their families, personnel issues, and complaints are not the business of the SPMT. Those issues are handled by administrators and other appropriate school personnel.

In addition, subcommittees may be assigned to handle certain tasks that arise during an SPMT meeting. Among the tasks that are referred to subcommittees are suggested policies or programs that require research before a decision can be made, as well as events that require planning.

Inappropriate [discussion on the SPMT] would be blaming teachers, blaming parents, blaming the administration—the blame game.

—Fred Hernández, principal

## **PROCESS: THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES**

With the SPMT, as with the entire SDP, how the work is accomplished is as important as the tasks themselves. In fact, the work of the SPMT is only as effective as the process used to accomplish tasks. The guiding principles of consensus, collaboration, and no-fault are the foundation of all SDP interactions.

## **ALL DECISIONS MADE IN THE BEST INTERESTS OF CHILDREN**

The SPMT is responsible for maintaining the school's focus on the needs of children. Agenda items, discussions, and decisions should all be guided by the question, "What is best for children?" The most effective way for the SPMT to gain this perspective is to ensure that all members of the school community are well-versed in the knowledge of the six developmental pathways that are critical to children's growth and academic learning.

## **TROUBLESHOOTING: HOW DOES THE SPMT DECIDE . . .**

### **. . . When to Meet?**

Keep in mind that you are involving a good number of school staff as well as parents and community members in the meetings. Most management teams find that

Figure 3.5 Sample form for SPMT meeting minutes

<b>Date:</b> <b>Team Members Attending:</b> <b>Chair:</b> <b>Facilitator:</b> <b>Recorder:</b> <b>Timekeeper:</b> <b>Other:</b>			
Agenda Item	Discussion/Decision	Person(s) Responsible	Follow-up Dates
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			

6.			
7.			
8.			
9.			
10.			

<b>Next Team Meeting Date:</b>	<b>Location:</b>
<b>Time:</b>	<b>Invited Guests:</b>
<b>Agenda Items:</b>	

**NOTES, IMPORTANT DATES, EVENTS, REMINDERS:**

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after-school meetings work best. Some schools' SPMTs meet in the evening or in the morning before the start of the school day to ensure that parents will be able to attend. Alternating meeting times can also increase the opportunities for parents and community members to attend. Meeting times should be determined by consensus of the team members. However, flexibility is important. The team should meet at least two times per month.

### **... How to Deal With a Principal Who Dominates the Meetings?**

It is not unusual for principals to have difficulty sharing leadership. To help guide administrators, teams can review the roles at every meeting and remind administrators of their role as group members.

Also, the chairpersons and facilitators can work with administrators ahead of

The purpose of the team is about altering power relationships. It's not about just the symbolic. If you only address the symbolic, business proceeds as usual. You have representation, but then you have the same problems within the team that you have in the regular school day. The team can start altering those relationships. So that is why it is important that the instructional leader—the principal—takes a risk and has the courage to allow the team to make the decisions.

—Fred Hernández, principal

time to identify those agenda items on which it is appropriate for them to lead. The name of each person speaking about an agenda item can be identified and recorded ahead of time. It is the facilitator's responsibility to keep any team member from dominating discussions. This approach requires that team members trust their administrators and vice versa. If nothing else works during the public forum, private discussion about the impact of the administrator's behavior on the rest of the team may be useful. This discussion is probably best coming from a fellow team member who has a good relationship with the administrator.

### **... How to Deal With Resistance?**

There is always some resistance in the beginning. Usually, the resistance stems from negative past experiences, which cause people to be reluctant to change. Most

You are going to have a subculture that will be resistant. But over time the SDP should become the dominant culture—the way you do business.

—Fred Hernández, principal

people find change uncomfortable, even when they know the old ways are not working. It is important to stress that the SPMT will not be taking on additional work, but rather learning more effective and efficient ways of working. To counteract resistance, the majority of the SPMT must support and participate in the new methods and attitudes of the Comer Process. In a sense, the SPMT will set the tone of acceptance

for the whole school community. Furthermore, it is critical that the rest of the SPMT members listen to the resistant members. These individuals may or may not have something valid or positive to contribute. However, if they don't feel that the rest of the team is genuinely listening, the resistant members will be disinterested for the remainder of their term and may end up sabotaging or subverting the team's efforts.

### ... What We Can and Can't Do as a Team?

Some SPMTs buy into the notion of shared leadership and the guiding principles so much that they operate outside of their responsibilities and authority. This can create problems. There are some clearly defined issues that should involve only the administrator. The sooner these issues are clarified, the less conflict there will be and the better the relationship will develop between the team and administrator. Personnel issues, for example, are between the principal and the staff member with the problem. Financial issues such as salaries also come under the category of privileged information. There are decisions that only the principal can make, and often those come as a result of dictates from the school system's central office.

The central office hires the principal, but the SPMT should be part of the process. The hope is that the SDP is systemically part of the school culture, and as principals come and go the team is still there. It becomes so engraved in the culture of the building that it stays in place whatever the changes.

—Fred Hernández, principal

On the other hand, the SPMT can, and should, serve on interview committees, especially when a new administrator is being hired. After all, the new principal's knowledge about and receptivity to SDP will have a direct impact on the continued success of the program. The SPMT and the new administrator should have this discussion at the first possible opportunity to avoid misunderstandings later on.

### READ MORE ABOUT ...

For a full discussion of team building, see "Teaming and Team Building," Chapter 10 in *Six Pathways to Healthy Child Development and Academic Success: The Field Guide to Comer Schools in Action* in this series.

For a full discussion of the principles, see "Three Guiding Principles for Interactions on Teams," Chapter 14 in *Six Pathways to Healthy Child Development and Academic Success: The Field Guide to Comer Schools in Action* in this series.

For a full discussion of SPMT subcommittees, see "School Planning and Management Team (SPMT) Subcommittees," Chapter 7 in this volume.