



EMPOWERED STUDENTS LEAD AND LEARN

ACADEMIC TEAMING BUILDS SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND COGNITIVE SUCCESS FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

BY MICHAEL D. TOTH

In a traditional teacher-centered classroom, the teacher works harder and harder to move students to greater learning gains, especially students on

the short end of achievement gaps and those with complex needs in mainstream classrooms. A pedagogical model called student-led academic teaming takes a different approach to

personalizing instruction and meeting the multifaceted needs of each student without increasing teacher fatigue and burnout. It allows teachers to work smarter, not harder.

With student-led academic teaming, students take increased ownership and accountability for their own and their peers' learning, relieving some of the pressure from the teacher and resulting in greater achievement gains. Working in teams, students are empowered to reach higher levels of critical thinking because they can rely on their peers for support and can challenge each other to move further.

Student-led academic teaming is a major component of Schools for Rigor, a school transformation approach created by Learning Sciences International that also includes assessment of school systems through scientific protocols, professional learning and coaching for teachers and school leaders, and constant tracking of student evidence to drive improvement in teaching and learning.

Schools for Rigor engages all leaders and staff in a common vision and language for rigorous instruction through academic teaming, which brings student ownership to the forefront of teaching and learning through shifts in lesson planning, classroom routines, instructional strategies, and expectations for teachers and students.

We recently conducted a study of Schools for Rigor in Des Moines, Iowa, one of our largest partner districts. Over the course of one school year, 22 schools that implemented the model built their capacity to facilitate 45-day cycles of professional learning for leaders and teachers. Students in these schools outperformed students in the district's control schools. (See the article on p. 48 for a detailed look at how professional learning for principals and principal supervisors transformed district leaders' focus on instruction.)

Notably, English learner students benefited significantly from the Schools for Rigor approach. We saw their engagement skyrocket and the achievement gap between English learners and non-English learner students narrow as they found the opportunity to share their thinking,

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- The full research report on Schools for Rigor in Des Moines Public Schools is available at www.learningsciences.com/rigor. See the appendix for more information on the study's methodology and calculations.
- Visit academicteaming.com for a comprehensive source of academic teaming expertise, including free resources, videos of academic teaming in action, author commentary, and case studies.
- More in-depth educator stories and experiences from Des Moines, along with a research-based framework and rationale, are included in *The Power of Student Teams: Achieving Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Learning in Every Classroom Through Academic Teaming* (Toth & Sousa, 2019). The book is available at www.learningsciences.com/books/the-power-of-student-teams.

respectfully challenge their peers' thinking, and elevate their learning in teams. This is an important achievement in a district where one in five students is an English learner.

STUDENT-LED ACADEMIC TEAMING

Student-led academic teaming is a daily instructional model in which the teacher's role shifts from spending most of the classroom time on delivering direct instruction and monitoring independent work to designing rigorous tasks and providing minilessons on foundational content and skills that students then further develop through collaborative work.

It involves students organized into small, diverse teams with clear protocols for engaging in standards-based academic team tasks (Toth & Sousa, 2019). Unlike a student *group*, which is teacher-directed, an *academic team* is student-led, ultimately functioning with little direct guidance from the teacher. Students work with their peers for most of the lesson.

Teachers create rich learning tasks and put academic teaming systems into place. Academic teams gradually take on some of the responsibilities traditionally held by the teacher, such as supporting struggling peers, ensuring learning is accessible and equitable among all team members, and

supporting struggling peers.

As teachers gradually transition from traditional instruction to student-led academic teaming, students form social bonds, internalize team norms, and learn to regulate their own learning and behavior. For example, when a teacher first puts her students into teams, she may provide team talk protocols where students converse with each other using sentence stems such as "I disagree with you because ..." and "Why do you think that?"

This process may feel awkward at first, especially for students who did not verbally participate in their learning previously, but, over time, students begin to feel more comfortable communicating with each other and engage in lively debates with no need to reference their sentence stems.

As student teams become more advanced, teachers spend less time monitoring student behavior and more time tracking student learning and providing additional support to those students not making progress to the lesson learning target, preventing achievement gaps before they happen.

EMPOWERING ENGLISH LEARNERS

The student-led academic teaming model can be particularly valuable for English learners because engaging in authentic collaboration with peers

allows them to experience high-quality rigorous instruction even in large general education classrooms. There are several potential benefits for English learners.

Enables productive struggle.

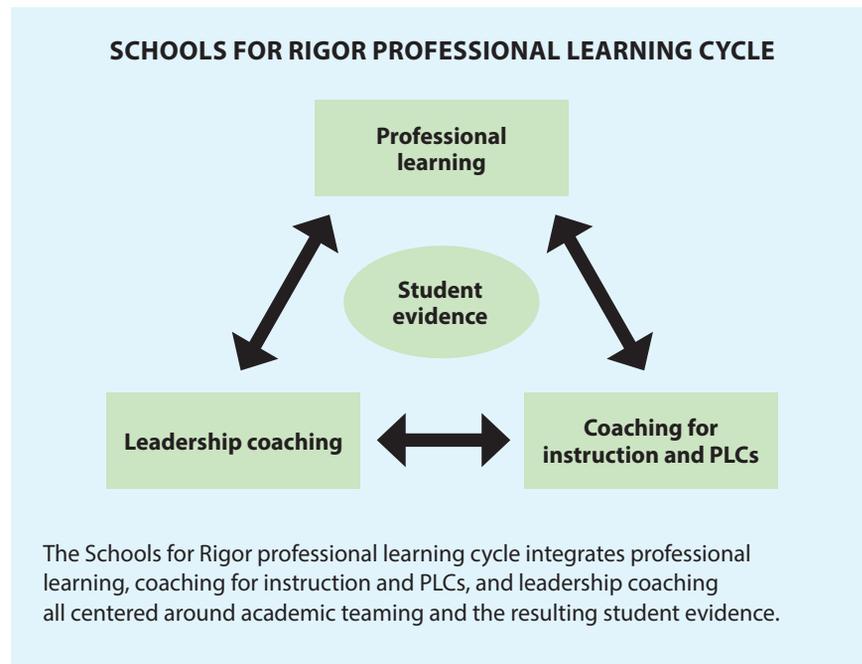
It is often difficult for teachers to watch their students struggle. This can be especially hard in the case of English learners because many teachers empathize with the fact that these students face particularly daunting challenges as they learn a new language. Teachers may want to step in to protect English learners from further hardship, but it is important that English learners, like all students, develop independence.

Productive struggle, defined as students working with knowledge and skills slightly above their current level of competency, occurs when students are thinking their way through a difficult solution or grappling with complex issues while the teacher steps back. Academic teams can support English learner (and other) students to engage in productive struggle. In their teams, they can rely on their peers for support and challenge each other to higher levels of critical thinking.

For example, a kindergarten teacher in Des Moines Public Schools gave an example of how her students, some of them English learners, are capable of more rigorous tasks while working together in a team. When students did independent activities in the past, the teacher assigned low-rigor work like copying down a sight word individually at their desks.

Now, because she knows they can rely on and learn from one another, she challenges teams to higher-rigor tasks like creating an entire sentence using the sight word correctly. She sets high expectations for all her students and reports that the children amaze her with what they are capable of (Toth & Sousa, 2019).

Increases opportunities to practice academic language. For English learners, the opportunity to consistently practice academic conversations in a low-stakes environment is crucial for developing confidence in speaking and



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listening.

In academic teams, English learners become immersed in academic language, and they have enough autonomy for academic conversations to flow organically and authentically. Furthermore, academic teaming is structured so that every student is accountable for participating in the team’s tasks. This ensures that all students are able to contribute to conversations and debates around the academic content.

Students say they feel more comfortable speaking with a small group of peers rather than raising their hands to speak in front of the

whole class. Students also say that they understand academic content better when a peer explains in their own words and that it is easier to remember the content after discussing it in their teams (Toth & Sousa, 2019).

Creates a supportive classroom culture. Student-led academic teaming creates a classroom culture where students learn to embrace their differences and use their diverse backgrounds and perspectives as strengths. Social and emotional bonds like trust, vulnerability, shared vision and values, and empowerment develop within the collaborative structure of the team.

As a result, English learner students are able to experience peer acceptance and belonging and, eventually, self-actualization. English learners are able to see that their unique perspectives and personal assets are valued and that they can be contributing members of their teams. Student voice and choice increases in academic teams, further boosting engagement and ownership (Toth & Sousa, 2019).

Academic teaming also supports all students’ social and emotional development. Just as students must engage in productive struggle to grow

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academically, they must also engage in productive struggle to grow socially and emotionally. This means teachers must create structures to let students resolve their own conflicts, coach each other through challenges, peer-teach, and ultimately ensure that everyone on the team reaches the learning target. Academic teams are well-suited to these strategies.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SUPPORTS

Schools for Rigor includes professional learning for school leaders and classroom staff, intensive coaching for leaders and teachers, and supporting technology to measure progress — all for the purpose of shifting the whole school to academic teaming.

Teachers and school leaders participate in a series of 45-day professional learning cycles. First, teachers and school leaders (as well as principal supervisors and other district staff, as noted in the article on p. 48) engage in professional learning days where they learn academic teaming techniques and create a shared vision and plan for shifting their instruction to teaming.

But professional learning days alone are not enough to create the capacity for whole-school reform. Schools for Rigor also includes expert, nonevaluative coaching for teachers and instructional coaches and professional learning community (PLC) leaders. They receive immediate feedback through live classroom coaching so they can make adjustments to their use of the academic teaming techniques for maximum effectiveness.

Outside the classroom, two levels of coaching create a system of demand and support to allow for the greatest impact in the classroom. Leadership coaching helps the principal, principal supervisors, and school leadership team learn to make demands and hold their staff accountable to high standards. Expert coaching for the school instructional coaches and PLC leaders helps teachers with systems of support

through the shift to academic teaming.

Coaching at both teacher and school principal levels allows for alignment and integrated supports while focusing the whole school on putting strong systems into place for sustainability. Teachers, coaches, PLC leaders, and school leaders are all focused around a learner-centered vision for instruction.

With the professional learning, coaching for instruction and PLCs, and leadership coaching all connected in one cycle of professional learning, the focus is always on positively changing outcomes for students by implementing academic teaming with fidelity and examining student evidence. (See figure on p. 53.)

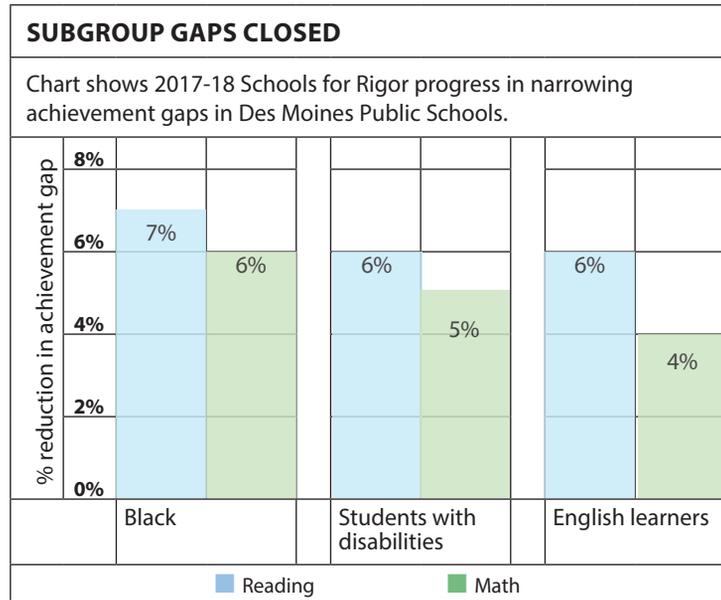
SUCCESS IN A LARGE URBAN DISTRICT

The Learning Sciences International Applied Research Center conducted a research study on Schools for Rigor, which builds capacity for student-led

academic teaming through professional learning, assessment, and tracking for leaders and staff in the Des Moines Public Schools district.

Des Moines is a large urban school district where more than one in five students is an English learner, and students speak over 100 different languages. In the 2017-18 school year, 22 of the 64 schools implemented Schools for Rigor and shifted to student-led academic teaming with professional learning supports. Those 22 schools included 10,431 students. In these schools, Learning Sciences International initially facilitated the professional learning cycle but then transferred this responsibility to the district, a transition that is critical for true sustainability.

Students at all Schools for Rigor — including those schools whose professional learning cycle was facilitated by Learning Sciences International and those schools whose cycle was facilitated by the district



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in their second year — experienced a statistically significant impact. Schools for Rigor students showed a 7% improvement in reading and 3% improvement in mathematics over the gain that would otherwise be expected within 162 school days.

This improvement translates into the equivalent of receiving an additional 11 days of learning in reading and an additional six days in mathematics for Schools for Rigor students. In other words, all students in the district would require an additional 11 days of reading instruction and an additional six days of mathematics instruction to make the same learning gains Schools for Rigor students did with academic teaming.

According to the district's 2017-18 math and reading assessment scores, English learners in schools where teaming was implemented outperformed English learners in schools where teaming was not

implemented. Schools for Rigor English learners reduced the achievement gap with non-English learners by 6% in reading and 4% in mathematics within 162 school days.

Results for other subgroups were also promising. Black students in Schools for Rigor reduced the achievement gap with white students by 7% in reading and 6% percent in mathematics. Schools for Rigor students with disabilities reduced the achievement gap with students without disabilities by 6% in reading and 5% in mathematics. See the figure on p. 54.

EQUITY FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS

Student-led academic teaming has the power and potential to result in more equitable outcomes for English learners and to better support English learners in general education classrooms as compared to traditional instruction.

Academic teaming provides English

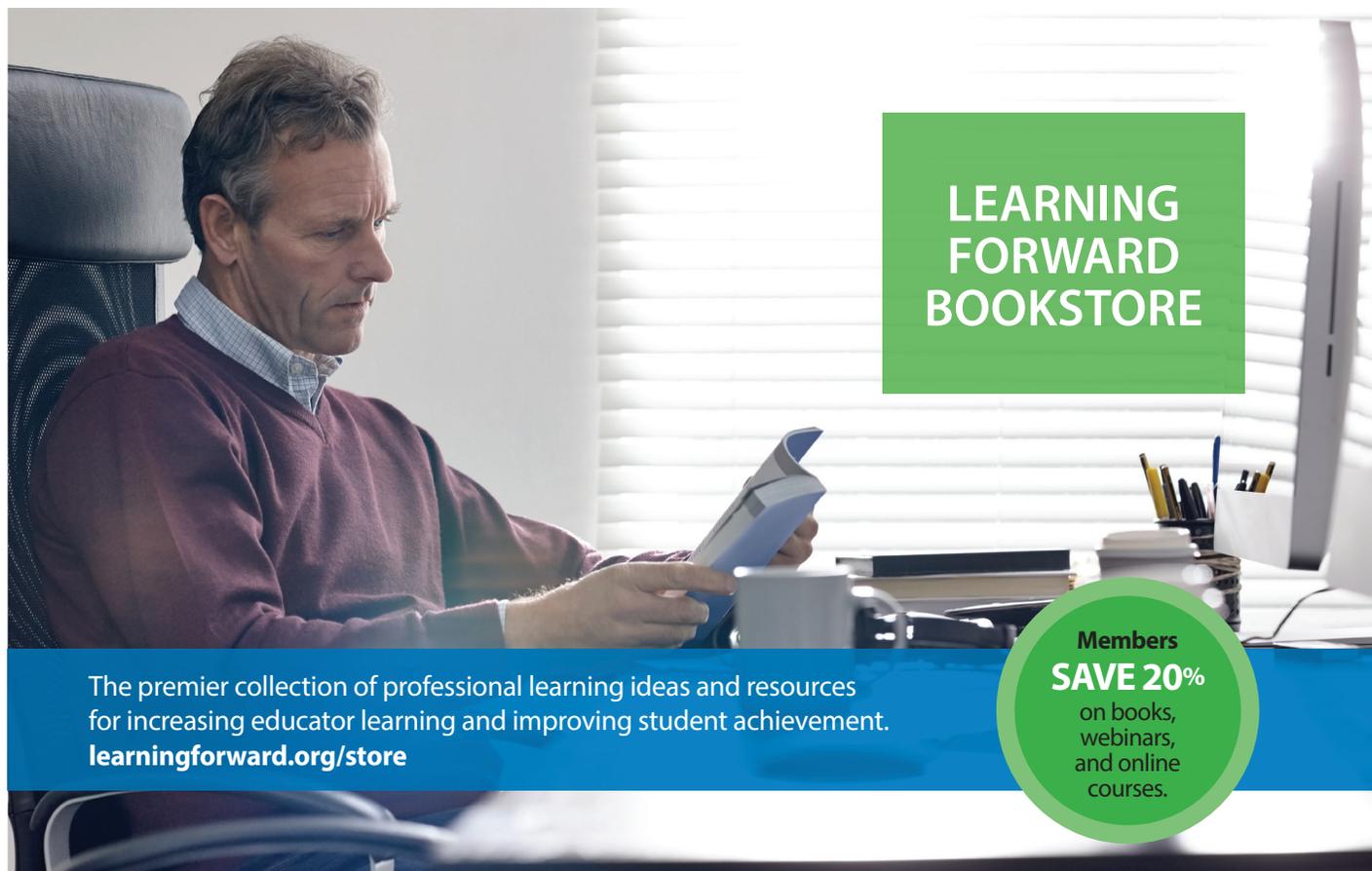
learners and all students with access to rigorous instruction, increased opportunities to practice speaking and listening, and a more supportive classroom culture.

Academic teaming also helps teachers and school leaders focus themselves around a common instructional vision and drive a sustainable professional learning cycle.

REFERENCE

Toth, M.D. & Sousa, D.A. (2019). *The power of student teams: Achieving social, emotional, and cognitive learning in every classroom through academic teaming.* West Palm Beach, FL: Learning Sciences International.

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