

“It’s not about whether you think you taught it, it’s about whether the students actually learned it.”
- Harriet Ball

Content Team Concept Paper: This document is a “how to” that outlines the various forms of study among teams of teachers who teach the same subject content or discipline (from here on referred to as a “content team”) and how to lead these groups to drive effective instructional practice and increase student achievement.

What is a content team?

A content team is a group of educators who share an instructional course or academic discipline who meet on weekly basis. While content teams can meet without a school leader, it is best practice to have a member of the leadership team present to drive the work as a guiding force and experienced educator.

What does a content team do?

A content team works to make sure that the delivery of curriculum and instruction to the students, that the group collectively teaches, is done at the highest possible level. This is accomplished by:

- **Looking at student work** to evaluate and respond to demonstrated learning. (See the LASW Protocol).
- **Tuning lessons**, giving feedback on teacher created lessons. (See the lesson tuning protocol.)
- **Studying curriculum.** (See the lesson internalization protocols for math and ELA.
- **Conducting teachbacks** to practice key elements of instruction make instructional refinements in real-time. (See the teachback protocol.)
- Reviewing and responding to **common assessment data**.

For each of these activities it is critical that the content team remain focused on Richard DuFour’s 4 essential questions that she outlines for all professional learning communities (a.k.a. content teams). These questions continually serve as the driving agenda of each meeting regardless of the activity.

1. **What do we want students to learn?** In a given unit or lesson, what do we want kids to understand?
2. **How will we know they’ve learned it?** What criteria for success will we accept as a display of mastery?
3. **What will we do if they don’t learn?** How will we spiral and re-teach when kids fail to master the content?
4. **What will we do if they are proficient?** How will we extend learning for kids who have mastered the content?

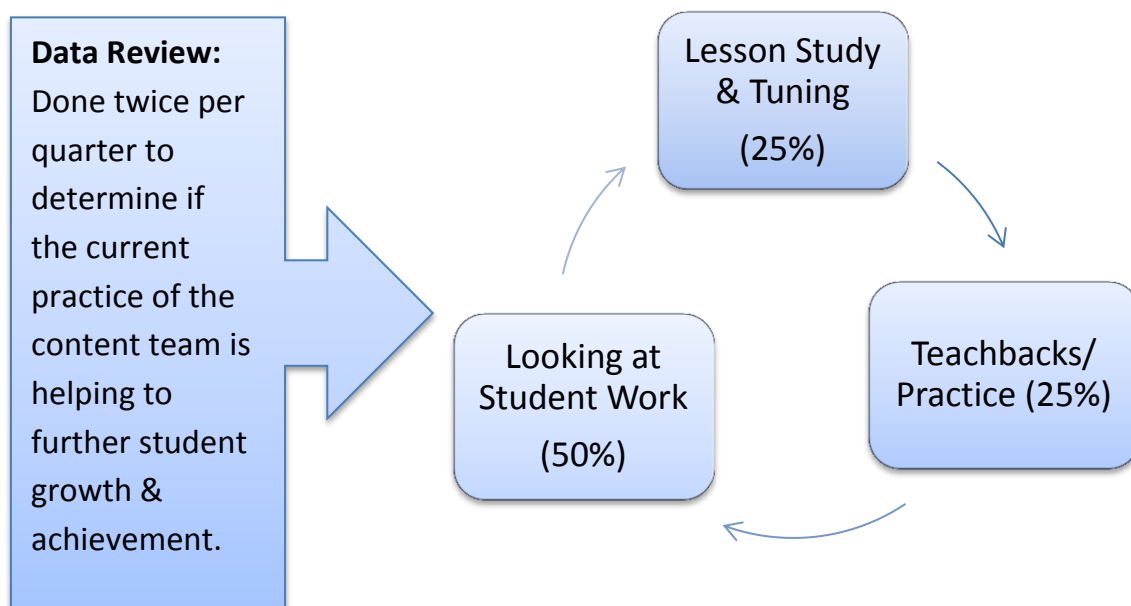
Crafting answers to these questions that are educationally valuable and universally understood by the team are the reason your content team exists.

Why are content teams important?

Content teams represent a professional development opportunity that combines collaboration and targeted practice, which makes them substantively different from coaching or large-scale professional development workshops. While both of those professional development activities obviously have their place in a comprehensive and well-planned program to improve instructional performance and drive student achievement, content teams represent an opportunity for colleagues who share similar instructional challenges and opportunities to learn together as a group and drive the practice of the entire team. In addition, because they have a common goal shared by a team, they allow for collaboration, sharing and ultimately group improvement that set the whole grade forward rather than a collection of individual students or teachers.

How should content team spend their time throughout the year?

The graphic below shows the basic structure of what content teams do during the course of the school year. Every 4- 8 weeks content teams study trends in student data against the long-term goals that have been established for the year. This analysis informs the content team as to what lessons/units should be studied, what elements of instructional practice should be taughtback (practiced) and finally what pieces of student work should be analyzed to determine daily mastery of the skills needed for student growth. The cycle on the left can be done during one content team meeting or over the course of three separate meetings, but the flow of studying work to inform lesson preparation and instructional practice is ongoing.



When should content teams meet?

Content teams should, at a minimum, meet once a week; however, we highly recommend they meet at least two to three times a week to provide sufficient time for practice and reflection. In addition, content teams should occur during the course of the school day in common planning times that have been carefully constructed in the school schedule. In certain cases meetings will need to happen before or after school, but to be truly effective they need to be regularly scheduled on a weekly basis that is rarely changed. They should meet for at least 30 full minutes (not including transition time) but 45 minutes to an hour is much preferred.

Where do content teams meet?

This actually matters. The meetings should take place in a school classroom that is free of distractions. Content teams can always head out on the road to see best practices in their school or beyond, but being based in a classroom is a critical component to reinforce the idea that this work all drives to what students do with the work we plan for them. It is also important to have meetings in classrooms because effective content teams practice their lessons (this deliberate lesson practice is called a teachback) and it is best to do it in a classroom setting. In certain instances and regions it may be necessary to meet remotely or off site. In all of these cases the participants should be sure to be free of distractions and in a space where they can practice lessons as needed.

How do we know if content teams are working?

The instructional leader of each content team has a responsibility to own the progress and development of the content team's effectiveness and growth over the course of the year. This is a process that involves:

1. Careful self-reflection – reviewing agendas, e-mails to the team and the degree and quality of participation from all team members;
2. Taking the temperature of the team on a regular basis – doing an on-line anonymous survey once a quarter allows for additional feedback from the team as well as temperature checks of the group at the end of meetings;
3. Getting outside analysis – have another leader in your building or region come and visit and give perspective on how the team is functioning and learning and how you are leading them;
4. Student work/data study – as DuFour and Harriet Ball remind us, at the end of the day all of this is about student growth and achievement. If your team's work is not moving students then something is wrong, which requires reflection and revision.

What resources can I access to support content teams in my school or region?

The KIPP Foundation has created a number of resources to support schools implement content teams including

- Protocols for Looking at Student Work (LASW), lesson study (both tuning and lesson internalization), and conducting teach-backs.
- A Content Team Implementation Rubric to review the effectiveness of content teams across a school or region.

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