

*This is a transcript of the T/TAC William and Mary podcast "Working Smarter, Not Harder – Syms Middle School Collaborative Teams".*

**[MUSIC: T/TAC William and Mary Podcast Intro]**

**Fritz GEISSLER:** The following is a recording with a team of teachers from Sym's Middle School in Hampton, Virginia.

**Jessie WILLAMS:** Jessie Williams - a Regular Ed. Social Studies teacher.

**Lesley SEAGRAVES:** Hi I'm Lesley Seagraves - Special Ed. Social Studies teacher.

**Cassimere CUSTER:** Cassimere Custer - Regular Ed. Social Studies teacher.

**Felicia WALKER:** Felicia Walker - Special Educator.

**Tina SPENCER:** These four teachers were 7th grade teaching team last year at Syms Middle School in Hampton. They are going to tell you how they came together and start working in presentation called "Working Smarter, Not Harder".

**WILLIAMS:** We started out by looking at some of the problems we had in the class, and we found out that we did not as teachers, we did not have enough time to fulfill the needs of every one of our students. When I started looking at the numbers, I realized that every year, I give a test every week and that test usually consists of 35 questions. Well at the end of the school year, I realized that I was making almost 1400 questions during the year. But I also looked around that some of the other teachers, 7th grade teachers that I work with, were making the same test. And at the end of the year, when I calculated how many questions how many questions that the 7th grade social studies and the 8th grade social studies were coming up with, it came to about 11,000 questions that Syms Middle School Social Studies Department was putting up. Not only that, but every day I have to write one lesson plan. There is a 180 days in the school year. I realized that I have about 45 minutes each time to plan a lesson. When I figured it out, Syms Middle School for a Social Studies Department was coming up with almost 20 days' worth of material. And I realized very soon that the reason I did not have enough time is that I was not working smarter, that I was working too hard. And that's when we, as a 7th grade team, decided to sit down and talk about how we could use our time better to meet every need of the student.

**CUSTER:** So we decided as a team to come together and create lesson plans, assignments, and activities for us to do together collaboratively. In order to make this idea successful, we first acknowledge that we had to study or establish a common location on where to meet. We also had to do this weekly. Same time, same place, and prepared. We came with our ideas, our lesson plans, our pacing guide that is given to us by the Hampton City School District. And we knew that we had to be open minded to ideas. So we would come together, we would follow pacing guide, establish a plan, and then go back to our classroom and execute that plan. Sometime doing these activities together, to help our students um ... we would learn more students at a time. We figured this would be best because we should be teaching the same thing anyways. We have a pacing guide, so why not establish lesson plans together. Once we used an activity, we would then come back to the table and determined if that activity worked or not. The students would be

very willing and able to tell us if they enjoyed the activity or not. If they didn't enjoy it, we would modify it, or even at times dispose activities that didn't seem to reach the students. Providing that we are regular ed. teachers and special ed. teachers that work together, we had to differentiate our activities as well in order to reach the needs of the variety of learners that we taught. Another thing that we did together, was to establish a common assessment. In order to determine what students have learned you need to assess them. So we would share this task as well. We would divide the information up based on SOLs, each teacher in the team would create questions based on specific SOLs. We would then put all our questions together to form one common assessment. We would administer the common assessments to our classes and the following week we would meet and analyze the data from the common assessments to determine what students have and have not learned. In order to insure that all students are learning the material necessary, we would then divide our lessons into groups based on specific SOL topics. Each one of us teachers would take an individual SOL and prepare an activity or a lesson to be done. We would then be using our data from the assessment to break up our two classrooms into 4 smaller groups, which allowed for 1-on-1 interactions with students and smaller group interactions. We found it also helped with behavior issues in the classroom, because students weren't getting bored. They weren't learning the same material over and over and over. And they were also getting ... re-taught a material that they needed to be re-taught in. We also found that we learned more students, I wasn't just learning my 80 students, I also had the pleasure of working with Ms. Elliot Seagraves and Mr. Williams students at times. Therefore it cut on discipline in the hallway, because I could direct students by their names because I had worked with them. So once we were able to reteach our students based on their assessment data we found it very successful in these small groups. And students were retaining the information that they most needed to be focused on. We used several techniques to do this re-teaching and Ms. Walker is going to talk about that.

**WALKER:** Sure. There were some other ideas that we used. Basically we wanted to keep students actively engaged and we wanted to make learning fun as well. So we created competition styled review games, class against class, or create teams. And how many activities did we use for Jeopardy, Survivor, and Vocabulary review activities would consist of either vocabulary bingo or even the fly swatter game (which was an activity where the students were divided into two groups, it's a vocabulary based activity, so vocabulary words were placed on index cards and those index cards were taped to a board or even a chalk board in the classroom. When the teams were divided each person from each one of the teams would come up with the fly swatter and the teacher would then give a definition to the vocabulary word. And then the student is to take the fly swatter and swat the appropriate vocabulary word that matched the definition). Also we found a good tool was having students work together with peer tutoring, often times learned better from one another. And so peer tutoring was used quite often. And the whole point was fun for students and easy for us- or for you as the teacher.

**SEAGRAVES:** Okay, so in closing, I would just like to recap what we discussed. Once each teachers agrees to share their work loads, students and teachers will be more successful. Secondly, you of course need to plan weekly with your teammates and be consistent. Third, when planning teachers need to use data to reteach students to meet their individualized needs.

And finally, I would like to leave you with this, we have all been single one time or another. And when we are single, we make plans for what we are going to do on the weekend or long-term plans. And when you become married, you give up that "I" for "We". And so that is how it should be in successful co-teaching relationship. And so also, as Ms. Custer has mentioned, that it is helpful with nipping behavior issues in the bud because you approach the children in a united front and they know you are on the same page so they are not playing one teacher against the other- as they tend to do with their parents. So it can be very beneficial to the teachers and the students.

**SPENCER:** Very good. Thank you all for sharing what you all did last year. The success rate was really good. I think your principal shared with me the results of the testing. Do you all know what your team did?

**WILLIAMS:** We had 100% pass rate with 79% of those students passed advanced.

**SPENCER:** Wow. So that's really good. So the whole idea is to just give it a shot. Try collaboration. When you work together you get great ideas, great relationships, and you do learn to work smarter, not harder for the success of all students. Thanks for sharing.

**WILLIAMS, SEAGRAVES, CUSTER, and WALKER:** Thank you, you're welcome.

**[MUSIC: T/TAC William and Mary Podcast Outro]**