



OPPORTUNITY CULTURE® Audio

How Small Groups Led to Big Middle School Math Growth

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Brian Tavenner: If you're working with your kids in small groups, you know exactly what they need when they need it and it's really hard for a kid to fall through the cracks and just sit there and not do anything when they're right in front of you. You can really see what they truly know and what they don't know.

Sharon Kebschull Barrett: Welcome to Opportunity Culture Audio. I'm Sharon Kebschull Barrett.

At Daniel Morgan Middle School in Winchester, Virginia, Team Reach Teacher Brian Tavenner teaches eighth-grade math—to 150 students, 50 per block. That may sound daunting, but by splitting the students into two adjoining rooms, with a reach associate paraprofessional, Braden Robertson, leading the other room, and by using mostly small-group instruction, Tavenner's students get the attention they need. In the 2023–24 year, end-of-year testing scores put them in the top 12 in the state for learning growth.

Tavenner: We pride ourselves here at Daniel Morgan on small group instruction; it is what we fully believe, it's the way we can reach the most kids. Obviously, there's a time and place for whole group instruction so there will be sometimes where I'm instructing all twenty-five, but we try to break out into small groups as much as possible. And same thing with my paraprofessional, and I am very, very lucky. My paraprofessional is studying to be a teacher. I trust him working with small groups and as we worked together last year for the first year, I trust him giving whole group instruction, and it's really allowed a lot more flexibility in my planning.

Barrett: Tavenner and Robertson sometimes switch students midway through a class period, but more often, they switch every other day.

Tavenner: Most of the time it's every other day or we found that we get more of a rhythm if we do like every other week because sometimes you build that momentum in a day and you don't want to lose that and kids have preferences, but the nice thing is that we've mixed it out enough that they know we're both in there to help.

So that first 30 minutes is kind of protected in terms of were doing either enrichment or number sense routines or remediation. And then that 60-minute lesson is going to be more of giving maybe, if needed, a 10-to-15-minute whole group instruction lesson and then immediately pulled into small groups. So, we've really tried to practice not just standing up there for 40 minutes and, you know, I'm going over two more problems, and half the class isn't paying attention, and half the class doesn't need it and it's like, generally you know who needs it and so it's time to get into small groups. And one thing we've really focused on is those small groups aren't always just for remediation, they're for enrichment, they're for kids who have mastered it and they're ready to move onto something else.

Barrett: Tavenner and Robertson also get support from a special education teacher and an English language learner teacher, and they're part of a Multi-Classroom Leader team, getting coaching and support on instructional practices.

While some students are in a small group, the others work independently. Small groups work best when they are limited to 10 or 15 minutes, Tavenner says.

Tavenner: When we are in small groups, we try to limit that to 10-15 minutes because we found that we don't want them to be dependent on us all of the time and also, we've got twenty-five kids—we've got to rotate kids through. So, we're trying to limit that to 10-15 minutes, we can usually kind of get them a little bit more instruction or remediation if they need it and then we try to get them back to working more independently or in small groups together.

Barrett: Tavenner believes strongly in the power of small-group instruction.

Tavenner: If I've got all of my students just sitting at their desks in a whole group setting and I'm just bouncing around the room trying to check everybody's papers or whatever, check their work, I'm not as effective—I can't reach as many kids so I'm only going to be able to really talk to one or two kids depending on how my room is set up at a time, whereas, if we've got kidney bean tables around, I've got two in each room and so if I pull four or five kids over I'm able to look at common things that they're missing and I'm able to work with more kids and be more effective with my time because obviously in education anywhere time is limited and it's precious and we've got to use that time as best we can; so, I'm able to reach more kids by pulling those small groups of four or five at a time and then rotating kids through than trying to bounce all over the room and I feel like I'm losing my mind, truly. So, I will say, a challenge with the small groups can be trying to work with your small group and also monitor your classroom. And having a co-teacher is beneficial with that regard but sometimes we're both running small groups and my paraprofessional's doing the same thing with his other, our other co-teacher. So just trying to keep your eyes up, you're surveying the room, you're making sure kids are on task but also working with your small group and we've got technology that allows us to do that with like, we've got Securely Classroom where we can monitor their Chromebooks—we can kind of see what they're doing, we can lock their screens into 'hey we just want you to have your Desmos calculator out and then their Canvas page up, you don't need to go be playing this game and that game.' So, it allows us to manage our classrooms better while we're effectively running a small group.

Our kidney tables are kind of in the back side of the room, the kids are facing the other way so we can see their screens, we can see what they're doing with their learning and their work while we have the small group in front of us. So, everybody is in front of us so we can see everything and that can be a challenge but it's something I think with practice you just get better at and you understand what to do and you realize how you can kind of change things and sometimes you want to create your small groups in a way that you're breaking, maybe, up certain personalities and so I know that I've got this group with me and sometimes that's a really good thing where everybody else is working more independently or in small groups together.

Barrett: Although the use of small-group instruction tends to drop off after elementary school, Tavenner advocates for it in secondary schools.

Tavenner: It takes time, it takes planning, it takes a little more effort for sure. I will say like I have done the whole group strategy and especially early on in my teaching career and it's a little bit easier to say 'hey, I've done some instruction, you need to practice, go ahead, I'll check your work at the end.' I think that's a little bit of the hesitation is that it definitely takes some more work throughout the day and it's, but it's so worth it because working in small groups you catch the mistakes in real time; you don't wait for them to turn in an exit ticket, you don't wait for them to do the quiz. Like, if you're working with your kids in small groups, you know exactly what they need when they need it and it's really hard for a kid to fall through the cracks and just sit there and not do anything when they're right in front of you. You can really see what they truly know and what they don't know.

Barrett: So much small-group time means he rarely even needs to use exit tickets anymore to check where his students stand.

Tavener: Every once in a while, we'll do them, but I honestly feel like sometimes I do them in my lesson plans because it's been like we do professional development on them and it's kind of the expectation and it's what we've heard. But if you're effectively running small groups and you know where your kids are throughout the class, I don't really feel the need for an exit ticket. We use a lot of technology to give us data, so we'll use like quizzes, Kahoots, Blookets, Skim Kits, to give us some data and see where the kids are. We use that data in real time like it's right on my Chromebook, I can see how they did and as soon as they submit that, I'm ready to pull them and I know exactly who I need and I don't have to look at a paper and grade it so then, usually, we use technology to kind of give us that initial data on a given day and then, we'll have something else for them to work on whether it's an enrichment activity; if they've mastered it I'm not going to have them do the exact thing, it's just repeating. So, they're going to go on to something else. If they're not there, then I'm going to pull them in that small group, and I'll usually develop that group of three to five at a time based on that information.

Barrett: He says this also lessens the need to take time away from instruction for deep data-dive days. Although he meets with his Multi-Classroom Leader team once a week to talk about data for all the students on the team, sharing strategies to use for struggling and succeeding students, they have few surprises when it comes to benchmark data.

Tavener: We don't really do the big data digs except for, like, at the end of the quarter they're going to take a benchmark and we're going to definitely dive into that pretty deep and look at what we need to do in the second quarter to fill in gaps and see where we need to do that, but I know exactly, pretty much to a tee where they're going to fall. There's always a couple of surprises for sure, some good, some bad, but I feel like I've got a really good idea of where they're going to be.

Even if an assignment is not graded I want to get that data; there's certainly a time and place where we may not be looking at as much of the data but we want to have something, at least if not daily, every other day to see where everybody is and what we need to do to fill in any gaps that we need to—and provide enrichment, that's been a big focus of ours this year is making sure that the kids who understand and mastered those concepts, we're providing them with resources and activities that enrich them and make sure that they're not just sitting there bored.

Barrett: When another adult, such as the special education teacher, can stay in his room, Tavener may also observe Robertson at work in the adjoining room, and co-teach with him.

Tavener: I will bounce back and forth between the rooms and when I go in and see what he's doing, it confirms to me that what we're doing is okay and it's good, and it's effective for kids because that ultimately that's what we're here for, we're here to help kids be successful. So, I'll go in, sometimes we team teach together which is really cool—that's what we pretty much did to start, so he could see instruction from my point of view, he co-taught with our special education co-teacher and they were able to lead the lesson a little more and he was able to chime in and work with those small groups. So, it was a gradual release of getting him comfortable with that but once we got it, it was pretty great. But I am able to go over there and that's amazing with the system we have because I can see it and I can pull kids and I can talk to kids and talk to him, you know, every day I feel like it's like I'll realize, 'oh, we want to tweak this so I'll go over and say, we're going to change this, this, and this' and so, that's part of teaching you know, you're changing on the fly, you realize that you think you've got the most perfect lesson plan in the world and sometimes things go awry and it's like we're going to just tweak this a little bit.

Barrett: Altogether, Tavenner says, his students grew so much because of the overall focus on personalizing students' instruction—and he grew, too.

Tavenner: We're trying to personalize every kids' education and every kids math class every single day—make sure that every kid is getting what they need. I think that that is so important and that's where that data comes from is we're not just focused on this subgroup or that subgroup; we're focused on every single child and it's not easy and it takes time and it takes effort, it takes preparation and it can be stressful, it can be overwhelming but I think at the end of the day what makes it effective and what makes me feel better about it is it's the best thing for each kid.

I've got one hundred fifty students involved, so whereas, as previously I was teaching about one fourth, maybe a fifth of the eighth-grade class, now I've got pretty much half of them and that's really meaningful and impactful for me. I realize that what I'm doing every day truly does make an impact on a lot of kids and I'm going to try to do that in the most positive way possible. So, for me, it's given me a little bit more purpose, it's made me a better teacher. When I'm planning, I'm truly thinking about like every decision I make, I have to think about how is this going to affect this group of students, how is this going to affect that group of students, how is this going to affect my special education co-teacher, how is this going to affect my EL co-teacher and my paraprofessional? So, I'm thinking about all those different lenses throughout all of my planning, and I think that's made me truly a better teacher and better prepared to give my kids what they need.

Barrett: Thanks to Brian Tavenner for his time, and thanks to you for listening. Use the search bar at the bottom of OpportunityCulture.org to learn more about Winchester Public Schools and their educators.