

BLOG

Planning Small Groups that Are Efficient, Effective, and Equitable

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Julie Wright

Welcome back to our blog series about the power of small-group learning!

In this series, educational consultant and author [Julie Wright](#) partners with [Dr. Katy Cortelyou](#) of Collaborative Classroom to share their collective thinking about launching and sustaining small groups in grades 3–6.

In [part one](#), our authors discussed practical ways to plan, launch, and sustain powerful small groups. In this second blog post, they focus on the universal issue of classroom time and consider how to make small group learning more efficient, effective, and equitable.

When Time Is an Issue

As an educational consultant and instructional coach, I frequently encounter the following sentiment among the schools I support: no matter how hard we work, there never seems to be enough time in the day to accomplish all of the desired goals.

As I study the use of time across classrooms, I usually ask, “How will we be efficient, effective, and equitable in our efforts?” Here’s what I mean:

- **Efficient:** Using time and resources to maximize goals
- **Effective:** Reaching intended outcomes successfully
- **Equitable:** Prioritizing educational opportunities that are free of bias, inequity, and discrimination

Using these lenses creates a laser-like focus, helping us keep our eye on the goal of supporting students to ensure their growth and development. Read on to learn some tips from Katy and me for creating small groups that provide more efficient, effective, and equitable learning experiences for all students.

TIP #1: HAVE MORE THAN ONE SMALL GROUP MEET AT THE SAME TIME

For years, teachers have learned to teach reading using teacher-led small groups. Today we know that widening our lens by offering up teacher-led, student-led, or teacher-/student-led small groups creates more efficiency and equity. There’s no standing rule that gives parameters about the frequency, duration, or intensity of each type of group. That’s the exciting part: teachers are the architects and are therefore responsible for designing small-group learning experiences that match students’ needs and wants. In order to create efficiency with small group reading, more than one small group needs to meet at the same time. Here’s one way you might get started.



Try This!

Select a short text that each small group will read. Consider selecting a poem, picture book, a novel excerpt, infographic, or article.

Briefly give students a few highlights about the short text. For example, you might share the title, author, and something this text makes you think about related to your own experience. Then, break the whole class into small groups (3–4 students in each group) and explain that each small group will read this same text. Small groups can:

- Read the text together (taking turns reading it orally), then discuss the main ideas or big

takeaways

- Read the text independently, come back together after, then discuss the main ideas or big takeaways

As small groups meet, you can strategically join some or all of the small groups. Sometimes you might lean in to listen and study, while other times you might actively participate. Both approaches have purpose and importance. If you need a note catcher to gather your thoughts, check out [this template for asset-based observation of small groups](#).

TIP #2: MINI-LESSONS THAT ARE TARGETED AND TIMELY

When might a teacher actively join and participate in a small group, and what might this look like? Ongoing formative assessment, such as [group observations](#) or analysis of students' reading journals, can help determine when to intentionally join a small group to facilitate a mini-lesson tailored to students' needs.

Try This!

When you observe that students need support extending and deepening their student-led small group discussions, try facilitating a mini-lesson focused on asking follow-up questions.

This is a skill that takes practice, but over time it will help students become careful listeners who respond purposefully to one another. Here's how that mini-lesson might go:

1. Gather with the small group. Ask students to reflect on and then discuss with a partner the question, "What are you or others doing with your small group to keep your discussions going?"
2. After the students have had time to discuss the question, invite volunteers to share their ideas with the group. As each student shares, ask one or more follow-up questions, using open-ended questions when possible. Jot down notes from the discussion for use in step 4.
3. Point out that during this discussion, you have been asking a type of powerful question called a *follow-up question*. Explain that a *follow-up question* is asked in order to follow up on, or learn more about, an answer to an earlier question.
4. Using your notes, repeat one of the exchanges you had with a student. Ask and briefly discuss: "What do you notice about the follow-up questions I asked? How do you think

asking follow-up questions will help you have interesting discussions about books?”

5. On a piece of chart paper that all students in the group can see, write the following: *Ask follow-up questions (often open-ended)*. You might also consider having students keep an ongoing list of these discussion techniques in their reading journals. This allows students to easily reference and revisit the techniques over time as they hone their discussion skills for powerful student-led discussions.
6. Have students practice using this skill as they discuss the day’s reading selection.
7. Conclude the mini-lesson by asking students to reflect on how they did at asking follow-up questions. Encourage the students to continue to practice asking follow-up questions and to notice what effects the questions have on their student-led, small group discussions.

This tip comes from the collection of mini-lessons within the [*Collaborative Classroom Book Clubs*](#) program for grades 3–6. To see more mini-lesson topics, along with guidance for creating your own small group mini-lessons, download these *Book Clubs* [lessons](#).

TIP #3: GIVE SMALL GROUPS MULTIPLE OPPORTUNITIES TO SHARE THEIR THINKING

When students share the work they produce (the stuff they write, make, create, talk about, design, perform, and do), we can lean into that work to gain insights into what students know, understand, and are able to do. Small-group learning opportunities should be filled with voluminous reading—opportunities to consume lots of different texts and text types—but should also include chances for students to make their thinking and learning visible. Here are a few ideas.

Try This!

Set aside time for students to work in small groups across several days. Decide what students will read, or group students based on interests. Consider:

- A series of articles related to a topic
- Several picture books written by the same author
- A blog post, magazine article, video clip, and website related to the same or similar topic(s)
- Book club novel

Break students into small groups, explaining that they will meet for several days to read and

discuss one or more texts.

Each day, before students move into small groups, share part of a short text and model how to use a [response stem](#). Explain that this is one way for students to hold their thinking about the text so that they can share with their small group.

Invite students to read the text(s) with their small group and then give one of the stems a try. Students can read, respond, and share their evolving thinking with their small group across several days.

TIP #4: GIVE SMALL GROUPS TIME TO EXPLORE DIVERSE, CULTURALLY RELEVANT, AND RESPONSIVE TEXTS

Students need and deserve opportunities to read texts and text types that explore diverse, culturally relevant topics, ideas, and characters. [As Rudine Sims Bishop reminds us](#), when students see themselves in texts, that provides a mirror to identity, inspires self-confidence, and creates an understanding and appreciation of others' strengths, knowledge, and journey.

Creating equitable experiences during small groups is bolstered when students have choice in what they read and a voice in decision-making about who, when, where, and how often they read. Here's one way to get these thoughtfully curated small groups up and running.

Try This!

Select and share a text set showcasing people, movements, topics, or ideas that inspire you and your students. For students in 5th grade or beyond, you might consider some of these [short story anthologies](#). Use one of my text sets or curate your own.

Share a few highlights from your chosen text set with students, explaining why these texts matter to you. You'll have to decide if students will use this text set or if you'll provide time for them to select texts of their own to read.

Next, invite students to independently read for 15–20 minutes. Then, give students a chance to meet with 2–3 other students and share one or more of the following:

- Three new facts or ideas
- Unanswered questions or wonderings
- Connections to the text (self, other texts, community or world events)

Small Groups: A Pathway Leading Toward Independence

We hope you enjoyed this blog series and gathered some practical ideas for launching, sustaining, and nurturing small groups with older readers. Flexible small groups that tap students' interests and curiosities while providing time for reading and authentic discussion, collaboration, and reflection are a powerful pathway leading toward independence.

As you incorporate these ideas into small-group learning, we want to hear from you! What small-group successes have you experienced with your readers? Let's continue the conversation—find us on Twitter at [@juliewright4444](https://twitter.com/juliewright4444) and [@katycortelyou](https://twitter.com/katycortelyou).



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