

INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER

Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association www.tepsa.org

May 2009
Vol. 22, No. 3

The Schedule as a Tool to Improve Student Learning

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Nothing has so much potential to impact a school's students and their learning as the schedule. It is the schedule that facilitates or inhibits the instructional program, promotes or limits collaboration, and builds community or fosters isolation.

It's All About Beliefs

A school's organization, including its schedule, reflects the prevailing values of the staff and administration. It is a tangible manifestation of what is important, and it reflects the collective commitment to students.

Schedules must balance many competing priorities including local curricular needs, human and financial resources, as well as the needs of students.

The most successful schedules are those that emerge when teachers and administrators work collaboratively in their design and the schedule reflects their shared vision for the school's instructional program.

Without a shared vision, the schedule is merely a plan for organizing teachers and students. When guided by goals and a shared commitment, the schedule becomes a powerful tool to positively impact student learning.

The Schedule as a Tool

Schedules are often considered fixed and unchangeable. They are frequently built to accommodate bus schedules, starting and ending times, and other management issues. The most successful schools are places where the schedule is a tool, where time is seen as a resource, and where a high value is placed on creating a structure that provides flexibility and empowers teachers to make decisions about the use of time.

The schedule can be used to improve instruction by providing teachers with long instructional blocks, by increasing flexibility, and by creating opportunity for interdisciplinary links. Additionally, the schedule can promote collaboration and build community by including common planning time for instructional or grade level teams, for content area meetings and for professional development. Schedules are tools to improve instructional effectiveness, promote collaboration and build community.

Longer instructional blocks and flexible schedules allow greater use of both small and large group instruction, lab-based activities, interdisciplinary units, team meetings with students, or service learning projects.

Many elementary and middle schools have established small learning communities. Each model varies in size and emphasis but is guided by a shared belief in the

importance of a personalized learning environment where teachers and students can sustain long-term relationships and where students learn in a safe and nurturing educational environment.

One elementary school near Seattle organized into multi-grade wings with each containing students from kindergarten through fifth grade. Individual classes remained separate but the structure provided opportunity for multi-grade collaboration and instruction. Special classes were scheduled to provide each wing with weekly common planning time for collaborative work.

Middle schools often organize into interdisciplinary teams. One of the values of teaming is the belief that when teachers work together they positively impact student learning. When the schedule provides common planning time, teams can meet to talk about instructional practices and plan a program appropriate to their students.

Scheduling Approaches

Four scheduling approaches provide flexibility in the school day. They include a block schedule, an alternating schedule, a dropped schedule and a rotating schedule. While quite different, each has advantages, but also implications for the instructional program.

Block Schedules

Many teachers value long instructional blocks which lend themselves to a range of instructional activities. Teachers describe block schedules as empowering because they allow the teacher to control the allocation of time for individual instructional activities.

Elementary teachers often value a long uninterrupted instructional block in the morning so that they can focus on reading and mathematics instruction. Scheduling of special classes such as music, art or physical education often break up these blocks. Since every teacher cannot have a long morning block the schedule often varies each day of the week.

A block schedule has several important benefits.

Teachers can use the schedule to:

- vary the amount of time for individual subjects based upon curricular or student need;
- provide time for assemblies and other special activities like team meetings and field trips without disrupting the structure of the entire day;
- permit grouping and regrouping of students for specific instructional activities;
- facilitate connections across curricular areas and provide for interdisciplinary instruction;
- allow for a range of instructional groups including large and small group instruction.

Middle schools using a teaming model often arrange for teams to have a common schedule, common planning time and long instructional blocks. The team can then decide how to schedule individual classes.

Block Schedule

	Daily Schedule
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	
6	
7	

In this example, the team can decide how to use their morning and afternoon instructional block. The time could be used for several equal-length classes or divided some other way. In Royal Oak, Michigan, the middle school teams often use the time for large group team meetings or for a guest speaker. In each case, they reallocate the time so that each subject meets, but for less time. These decisions reside with the team, not with administration.

Alternating Schedule

A second way to increase flexibility is to use an alternating schedule. Some middle schools rotate the schedule daily, some less frequently. Regardless, an alternating schedule is designed to provide instructional flexibility. Some models provide time for additional exploratory or elective classes.

When combined with long instructional blocks the alternating schedule provides additional flexibility for teachers. Lab-based courses like science, art or physical education often benefit from an alternating day schedule. Since each class is longer, there is less time needed for setting up labs, getting materials or changing clothes.

Alternating Schedule

Day 1	Day 2
1 st Period	5 th Period
2 nd Period	6 th Period
3 rd Period	7 th Period
4 th Period	8 th Period

One of the concerns with an alternating day schedule is that even though individual classes are longer, most classes meet less frequently. Some content areas prefer the continuity of daily class meetings.

Dropped Schedules

A third approach is the dropped schedule. In such a model, a class is dropped, and something else is added. Some schools use a version of a dropped schedule to include six classes in a five period day. In this case they schedule five long class periods each day and modify the daily schedule so that each class meets four times each week. The remaining period is used for an advisory, advocacy or seminar period.

Dropped Schedule - Example 1

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri
1 st	1 st	1 st	1 st	6 th
2 nd	2 nd	2 nd	Seminar	2 nd
3 rd	3 rd	3 rd	6 th	3 rd
4 th	4 th	6 th	4 th	4 th
5 th	6 th	5 th	5 th	5 th

Another type of dropped schedule replaces two classes each week for an advisory, advocacy or seminar period. The “dropped” classes change each week so that the same classes are not impacted every week.

Dropped Schedule - Example 2

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri
1 st	1 st	1 st	1 st	1 st
2 nd	2 nd	2 nd	Seminar	2 nd
3 rd	3 rd	3 rd	3 rd	3 rd
4 th	4 th	4 th	4 th	4 th
5 th	Seminar	5 th	5 th	5 th
6 th	6 th	6 th	6 th	6 th

Rotating Schedule

Another way to provide flexibility is a rotating schedule. These schedules change the order of classes every day. Rotating schedules are less prevalent than other models in middle schools.

One of the benefits of a rotating schedule is that students do not attend the same class at the same time each day. This means that students and teachers develop a more holistic view of one another. Students who may be less engaged early in the day may be much more involved later in the day.

Rotating Schedule - Example 1

Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri
1	2	3	4	5
2	3	4	5	6
3	4	5	6	7
4	5	6	7	1
5	6	7	1	2
6	7	1	2	3
7	1	2	3	4

Scheduling of part-time or shared teachers can be problematic in a rotating schedule. Substitute teachers and other visitors are often challenged with the model. However, once the model is fully implemented, most personnel praise its benefits.

Transitioning to a rotating schedule can be a challenge for many staff members. One middle school team found a way to get the benefits of teaming by rotating the order of classes each month, rather than each day. This provided the benefits of rotation without the stress of altering the schedule each day.

Rotating Schedule - Example 2

	Aug, Jan	Sep, Feb	Oct, Mar	Nov, Apr	Dec, May
1 st Period	Math	Reading	Lang Arts	Soc Studies	Science
2 nd Period	Science	Math	Reading	Lang Arts	Soc Studies
3 rd Period	Soc Studies	Science	Math	Reading	Lang Arts

Lessons from Other Schools

Principals who are most successful at changing their school’s schedule are principals who work closely with their teachers. These principals value the suggestions of their staff and respect the varied points-of-view among their faculty. There are several important lessons:

1. *Start with clearly identified goals* – Schools are rarely successful in changing the instructional program when they simply change the schedule. Any modification to the schedule must be accompanied by a discussion about the reasons why such a change is sought. Clear, specific goals must be identified.

Clear goals and rationale for a new schedule build support for the new model. The presence of clear goals also helps to narrow the alternatives to be considered. The discussion provides an opportunity to build consensus for the initiative and allows the faculty who are less eager for change to participate in the discussion.

One way to start a discussion about goals is to use a set of questions to guide the discussion. Sample questions may include:

- Do some subjects need more time than others?
- Do all subjects need to meet each day?
- How will we allocate time based on the needs of our students?
- How can we facilitate interdisciplinary connections?

2. *Question past practice* – Many school schedules remain the same from year to year. These long-standing practices provide comfort and familiarity. One strategy adopted by some principals is to revisit these practices.

A thorough review of the current schedule provides an

opportunity to assess current curricular and instructional needs, to discuss students' learning needs, and to update the structure of the day. Even if parts of the schedule remain the same, a review provides an opportunity to recommit to a structure that maximizes benefits for students and teachers.

One principal in Colorado used a short anonymous survey of staff to gather information about the current schedule. The data refuted the notion that there was no interest in change.

A principal in Ohio worked with her leadership team to collect data about student learning. These data were shared, examined and formed the basis of their discussion about modifying the schedule.

3. *Value collaborative work* – Change is most successful when it has broad support among faculty. The evidence is clear that the impact on student learning is greatest when teachers and administrators share responsibility for instructional improvement.

Participating in planning for a modified schedule also serves as a form of professional development. Investigating scheduling options, examining their benefits and recommending a model can be a powerful tool for creating professional community. Participation also builds capacity for successful implementation of any new model.

Integral to the success of collaborative planning is the assurance of a balanced review of the options. There are multiple points of view on any alternative. Every scheduling model has advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages and disadvantages should be identified and openly discussed. Open, honest discussion leads to increased support for any recommendation.

Final Thoughts

The most successful schools are comfortable examining practices and making adjustments when necessary. Principals have come to recognize that the use of time and structure is one variable which, when altered, can positively impact the instructional effectiveness of the school.

There are many different scheduling models, each with specific benefits. No single schedule fits every school or every situation. It is important that any discussion about a modified schedule be guided by clearly identified goals and shared values.

Author

Dr. Ron Williamson works with schools on issues of scheduling and school improvement. He is the author of several books on scheduling including "The Principalship from A to Z" (Available from Eye on Education at www.eyeducation.com/prodinfo.asp?number=7105%2D8) and "Scheduling to Improve Student Learning" (Available at www.nmsa.org). He is Professor of Educational Leadership at Eastern Michigan University.

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Instructional Leader is published every other month by the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association, 501 East 10th Street, Austin, Texas 78701. Telephone: 512-478-5268.

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