

**SCHEDULING FOR GRADE TEAM PLANNING IN THE ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL: A FORMATIVE EVALUATION**

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Abstract

To inform decisions related to an elementary school schedule (Block Planning Time) designed to decrease fragmentation of instructional time and increase collegial planning opportunities, school administrators conducted a formative evaluation. After six months of Block Planning Time, data were collected at five elementary school sites using a survey instrument cooperatively designed and field tested by the staff and the evaluators. The survey, which had a response rate of 75%, focused on (1) building collegiality, (2) reducing fragmentation of the school day, and (3) impacting students and instructional practices. Closed-ended questions were tabulated and open-ended questions were content analyzed. More than 80% of the responding teachers “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with closed-ended statements describing an increase in collegial behavior since implementation of Block Planning Time. Analysis of open-ended responses resulted in similar findings. Closed-ended responses concerning fragmentation of instruction was less uniformly positive. More than 80% of responding teachers “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that the schedule reduced fragmentation; however, less than half felt the planning times were uniformly long and time for planning was adequate. Open-ended responses suggested time modifications. Responses on the impact on students and instruction indicated that instructional practices they were using were discussed during planning, grade-level activities were more coordinated, and innovative ideas were implemented as a result of Block Planning Time. Overall, survey results indicated Block Planning Time was successful in meeting its goals of increasing collegiality, reducing fragmentation of the school day, and impacting students and instruction. Concerns expressed by teachers were the lack of opportunity to meet with special class teachers and the need for more planning time.

Scheduling for Grade Team Planning in the Elementary School: A Formative Evaluation

Introduction

A problem frequently articulated by elementary school classroom teachers, as contrasted with their secondary school counterparts, is lack of uninterrupted time for teaching (National Education Commission on Time and Learning, 1993). Pullout programs taught by specialists routinely disengage students from their classroom activities. Music, art, dance, drama, physical education, foreign language, media, and guidance represent but a few of the possible special area classes typically scheduled in elementary schools. Additionally, English as Second Language classes, academically gifted services, and special education and exceptional children's related services, including but not limited to resource, speech and hearing therapy, occupational therapy, and physical therapy, are routinely provided on a pullout basis for selected students. Consequently, the resulting classroom teaching schedule for language arts, social studies, mathematics, science, and any other discipline not taught by a specialist, is fraught with small chunks of time inadequate to sustain meaningful teaching and learning.

A corollary problem in the typical elementary school involves the lack of time scheduled for collegial planning, particularly time shared by all teachers at a given grade-level (Joyce and Calhoun, 1995). Given a goal of enhancing student performance through collaboratively designed and implemented instruction, teachers without time for joint planning during the instructional day are compelled to meet before or after school hours, a practice often conflicting with professional development activities, parent conferencing, committee, school or district meetings, and student supervisory duties.

Citing problems of fragmented instructional time and lack of collegial planning opportunities, teachers and administrators in a small district in central North Carolina restructured their elementary school schedule. The result, termed "Block Planning Time," was created by scheduling specialists for equal periods of instruction on a rotating schedule during the same time block one day per week. Organized into three classes at each grade, students experienced varying sequences of physical education, music, and media for 30 minutes each, providing a total of 90 minutes shared planning time for all three classroom teachers at grade-level. In the beginning of the first year of implementation, the principals routinely met with the grade level teams both to inform and be informed of instructional planning and other curricular issues. The principals decreased their visitation time as the team gained experience and expertise in collaborating. Student movement to and from the special area classes was facilitated by teacher assistant who also remained with the classes during special class instruction.

To inform decisions related to Block Planning Time, school administrators conducted a formative evaluation midway through the first year. The purpose of this paper is to report the findings and their implications.

Related Literature

Education practitioners and researchers increasingly recognize scheduling and teacher collegiality as tools for school improvement. Canady and Rettig's (1995) field research indicates that a well-crafted schedule can (1) enhance the use of time, space, and resources; (2) improve the instructional climate; (3) ameliorate problems related to the delivery of instruction; and (4) assist in establishing innovative programs and practices. In the elementary school, they suggest (1) scheduling parallel blocks of classroom instruction; (2) rotating itinerant specialists on a nine-week or semester basis; (3) scheduling recess time contiguous to a class change to avoid time lost to movement; (4) avoiding short periods of time between lunch and special classes; and (5) scheduling all specialists for equal periods of instruction on a rotating schedule during the same daily time block.

Watts and Castle (1993), writing for the National Education Association Center for Innovation, report additional strategies implemented by effective schools. Time for elementary teachers to plan may be provided by (1) having teacher assistants cover classes; (2) having administrators teach classes; (3) team-teaching such that one teacher substitutes for another; (4) regularly scheduling early release days for teachers; (5) having parent volunteers cover classes; (6) implementing "theme and team-teaching" in which activities supervised by teachers from one grade release teachers from other grades; (7) banking time on four days and releasing students early on the fifth day; (8) creating a first period school day for teachers without students present; (9) replacing faculty meetings with common planning time; (10) consolidating district-imposed meetings into a single day; (11) reducing faculty meeting frequency and duration by using pass-and-read folders for disseminating information; (12) purchasing additional time for teacher planning in the summer or evenings; (13) reducing class size; (14) implementing mini-retreats during the school year; (15) acquiring substitute teachers; and (16) sharing teaching assignments.

Hoerr's (1996) field observations suggest that teachers in successful schools take responsibility for helping their peers learn and grow. To develop collegiality, he recommends the following: (1) allocating significant chunks of time for teachers to meet; (2) inviting, rather than commanding, participation in change; (3) sharing power and decision making with teachers; (4) valuing collegiality through principal participation in meetings and by acquiring substitutes for teacher planning sessions; and (5) focusing collegial efforts on meaningful issues. Little (1982) and Rosenholtz (1989) found that teachers who develop teaching materials together, plan together, seek one another's help, watch one another teach, and reflect together about their students and their teaching are more likely to succeed in implementing innovative instructional programs and strategies.

In summary, findings from the literature and research on scheduling and teacher collegiality suggest that significant benefits to students and teachers may accrue as a result of crafting a school schedule that reduces fragmentation of instructional time and that provides for collegial planning opportunities. Numerous examples of successful strategies exist; Block Planning Time may be viewed as one district's response.

Data Source and Methods

The data collection method was a survey field tested and administered during the first year of implementation. Based on staff input as to the most important areas to be assessed about the effects of Block Planning Time, the survey focused on three areas: (1) building collegiality; (2) reducing fragmentation of the school day; and (3) impacting students and instructional practices. The survey was administered to the staff at each of the five schools participating in the project. A total of 83 teachers responded to the close-ended portion of the survey. Of the 83 responses, 23 responses on the open-ended portion of the survey were available for analysis for this evaluation. Close-ended questions were subsequently tabulated and open-ended questions were content analyzed. The survey results are discussed below.

Results

Did Block Planning Time increase collegiality?

Table 1 shows the results of 10 survey items addressing collegiality among teachers. On nine of these items, more than 80% of the responding teachers either “strongly agreed” or “agreed”. For example, at least 90% reported being more receptive to new ideas, talking more to each other about their teaching, and asking for advice on classroom management and instructional issues. The only area in which participating teachers did not report an increase was in observing each other teaching. Based on these survey results, it is clear that these teachers felt Block Planning Time had a positive impact on sustaining collegiality.

Teachers’ open-ended responses also indicated that teachers felt Block Planning Time was effective in increasing collegiality. Eight of the 23 responding teachers reported that a strength of the planning schedule was that teachers were able to share ideas and concerns about what they were doing in the classroom. Seven teachers felt a benefit of the schedule was their ability to consistently work together as a grade-level team. On the down side, 10 teachers indicated there was not adequate time to meet with the special class (music, media, and PE) teachers.

Table 1

Results of Survey Items Concerning the Impact of Block Planning Time on Collegiality

<u>Area of Collegiality</u>	<u>Percent Agreeing (n=83)</u>
<i>We more often...</i>	
Are receptive to new ideas.	95%
Talk to each other about what we are trying in our teaching.	93%
Ask each other for advice on classroom management and instructional issues.	90%
Plan curriculum together.	86%
Back each other up when trying new things.	85%
Show initiative in proposing new ideas.	85%
Analyze our instructional practices, curriculum approaches, assessment techniques, and school organizational policies.	85%
Talk with each other about essential outcomes for all learners.	83%
Design lessons together.	82%
Observe each other teaching.	13 %

Was Block Planning Time effective in reducing fragmentation of the school day?

Five survey items addressed the goal of reducing fragmentation. These results are provided in Table 2. Teachers were less uniformly positive about the efficacy of Block Planning Time in reducing fragmentation. More than 80% “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that the instructional day was less fragmented and that there was still time to meet students’ personal needs. However, approximately half of participating teachers felt the planning times were uniformly long and that the time allocated for block planning was adequate. Only a third felt there was adequate time for attending to students’ personal needs between planning classes.

Comments from responding teachers help to shed some light on these results. For example, 11 of the 23 responding teachers had suggestions for time modifications to the Block Planning Time schedule. Five of these 11 were requests for more planning time. Four teachers voiced a desire for a few additional minutes between the special classes so students would not have to rush.

Table 2

Results of Survey Items Concerning the Impact of Block Planning Time on Reducing Fragmentation of the School Day

<u>Area of Fragmentation</u>	<u>Percent Agreeing</u> (n=83)
The instructional day is less fragmented since block planning time.	87%
Block planning classes cause little interference with students' personal needs.	81 %
Block planning times are uniformly long for all grades and during all times of the day.	53%
The amount of time allocated for block planning is adequate for planning purposes.	47%
There is adequate time between block planning classes for students to meet personal needs.	33%

What was the impact of Block Planning Time on students and instruction?

Nine items were developed to assess teachers' perceptions of Block Planning Time on students and instruction. The results of these items are shown in Table 3. Overall, participating teachers indicated that (1) instructional practices they were using were discussed during planning; (2) grade-level activities were more coordinated; and (3) innovative ideas were implemented as a result of Block Planning Time. Several items showed greater variation in teacher responses. For example, approximately two-thirds of responding teachers reported that more interdisciplinary teaching was occurring, and less than half of the teachers felt students had been positively affected by back-to-back special classes.

Table 3

Results of Survey Items Concerning the Impact of Block Planning Time on Students and Instruction

<u>Area of Impact</u>	<u>Percent Agreeing (n=83)</u>
Instructional practices used in the classroom are discussed in block planning time.	91 %
Grade-level activities are more coordinated now than before block planning time was implemented.	83%
Some innovative ideas have been implemented in the classroom as a result of block planning time.	79%
The uniformity of teaching units at grade level has improved since block planning time.	74%
Students have responded positively to block planning time.	73%
More interdisciplinary or integrated teaching has occurred since block planning time.	66%
The quality of blocked programs (music, media, PE) has been maintained since block planning time.	63%
There is little difficulty getting students refocused after block planning time.	61 %
Student learning has been positively affected by back-to-back special classes.	41 %

Conclusions

Survey results showed that the reorganization of the school day was successful in facilitating collegiality. At least 90% of participating teachers reported being more receptive to new ideas, talking more to each other about their teaching, and asking for advice on classroom management and instructional issues. Teachers were not as uniformly positive about the efficacy of Block Planning Time in reducing fragmentation. While more than 80% agreed that the instructional day was less fragmented and that there was still time to meet students' personal needs, only a third felt there was adequate time for attending to students' personal needs between planning classes. With regard to Block Planning Time's impact on students and instruction, participating teachers indicated that instructional practices they were using were discussed during planning, grade-level activities were more coordinated, and innovative ideas were implemented as a result of Block Planning Time. Overall, survey results indicated Block Planning Time was successful in meeting its goals of increasing collegiality, reducing fragmentation of the school day, and impacting students and instruction. Concerns expressed by teachers were the lack of opportunity to meet with special class teachers and the need for more planning time. Logistically, the sustainability of the project rested on schools' pairing together to schedule the special class teachers; however,

when one school implemented a new school-wide project involving the hiring of additional special teachers, the pairings became impossible and, two years after its implementation, Block Planning Time was discontinued.

Educational Implications

Embracing the idea that the school schedule may be used as a vehicle for improvement, elementary teachers in central North Carolina created opportunities to plan collegially and reduce instructional fragmentation in their schools. Although the data from this evaluation suggest that student instruction was impacted positively, teacher responses to survey items may be a necessary but insufficient means of measuring student achievement. One may argue, however, that the increased opportunity for professional conversation and the freedom resulting from concentrating classroom pullouts on one day positively impact school climate, a variable often linked to student performance. Enhancing teacher collegiality and reducing fragmentation of instructional time are desirable school practices. Whether planning lessons for next week or redesigning the entire curriculum, teachers need time to collaborate, to engage in professional dialogue about learning and teaching, to reflect on what's going right and what's going wrong, to plan and to assess the plan.

Similarly, students need concentrated periods of time for instructional activities. As teachers benefit from purposeful time with peers, so, too, students engaged in making meaning with curricula require time to share and to create connections. The importance of allocating large blocks of time for instruction, particularly for reading and writing activities, is unassailable (Allington and Cunningham, 1996). Arguably, the fragmented nature of instruction in the traditional elementary school and the absence of scheduled collegial planning is a prescription for underachievement.

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