



FEATURE

Flex time: Schools break out of scheduling ruts to improve learning for students, teachers

Newer designs accommodate instructional needs and teach students time management skills

By **Linda Jacobson** • Feb. 14, 2018

There's no such thing as a typical day for Heather Kostelecky.

On one day, the pre-calculus and Advanced Placement (AP) statistics teacher at Legacy High School in Bismarck, ND, might have small breaks from teaching throughout the day. On another, she is with students all morning. And then some days, she spends time in the school's STEM "Saber Center," where students can find tutoring or time to complete homework.

The variety throughout Kostelecky's week is the result of what the school calls personalized scheduling — a system in which each day is broken down into 22 20-minute blocks, and teachers determine how to stack those blocks for their subject areas throughout the week.

"I don't think all classes need to have the same number of minutes," says Principal Tom Schmidt. The school, now in its fifth year, also tried a block schedule before shifting to this model when it moved into a new building. "We were given the green light to go ahead and do something different."

So, as if they are withdrawing cash from an ATM, teachers decide at the beginning of the semester whether they need 40-, 60- or 80-minute periods throughout the week. An 80, for example, allows for "call back" time in which teachers can meet

individually with students who need extra help, while a 40 might be used for completing hands-on projects or student presentations. Students, as a result, don't attend the same classes every day and have breaks within their schedules to study independently, work out in the gym, or visit a Saber Center.

"Students seem to be more present during class since each day is so different," Kostelecky says. "I don't see the monotony of having the same schedule day in and day out setting in, and this is true for teachers as well."

A 'key component' of personalized learning

With more schools shifting some portion of student learning to online platforms, administrators and teachers are finding that the traditional six- or seven-period day in high schools and some middle schools no longer meets their needs. Just as schools are redesigning spaces to accommodate today's learners, they are also implementing innovative schedules that allow for the type of flexibility that both students and teachers want.

The challenge, however, comes in trying to spread such models across a district, says Marilyn Crawford, who works with School by Design to help educators rethink how they can use time and staff members to accomplish what they are trying to achieve with students.

Many schools, she says, try to personalize learning or expand professional learning opportunities for teachers within existing master schedules, without realizing that there is wasted time within the current structure and staff members whose talents could be used in different ways to provide more targeted learning opportunities for students.

In fact, researchers who have examined the growth of personalized models across the country often note that the constraints of traditional bell schedules tend to get in the way. "As schools across the country reimagine their school day schedules, they will be most successful if they customize the use of time to meet content needs rather than adapting content to fit a fixed schedule," wrote the authors of "Reimagining the School Day," a 2017 report from the Center for American Progress.

Researchers from the RAND Corporation, who have been following the Next Generation Learning Challenges (NGLC)'s Breakthrough School Models initiative, also recommended giving schools more autonomy to adapt their schedules. “Flexibility to design a schedule that supports the school model and vision of [personalized learning] and modify it as needed over the course of the year, can be a key component of successful [personalized learning] implementation,” they wrote in "Informing Progress: Insights on Personalized Learning Implementation and Effects."

Looking at staff in a different way

Some schools begin adapting their schedules in order to build in more time for teacher collaboration and planning. Melanie Pondant, the director of secondary curriculum for the Longview Independent School District (LISD), about 130 miles east of Dallas, didn't believe what Crawford was describing was possible.

“I was like, ‘We can get one day a week where teachers don't teach? Show me,’” Pondant remembers.

And Crawford did.

The change began at two of the district's three middle schools. “Flex” days were built into the weekly schedule, in which teachers in one content area meet together for a day of planning, collaboration and professional learning. Other staff members — those who might have been providing instructional support or teaching electives — teach classes during that time that include study skills, art, choir, technology and other topics. A school nurse could even teach a CPR class. Flex days can also be dropped perhaps if teachers want more time to prepare students for an upcoming state test. In that case, those elective teachers go into the classrooms to provide students with extra help.

“It really forced us to look at our staff in a different way,” Pondant says, adding that the design has become a recruitment tool. New teachers out of college might be able to earn more money in Dallas or other large districts, but knowing they'll have one full day a week without students and won't have to take papers

home to grade at night is an attractive feature, Pondant says. The district also saves money because it no longer needs to hire substitute teachers to work on professional development days.

Working out the kinks

School and district leaders say brainstorming sessions are necessary before breaking away from old models. At Legacy High, Schmidt asked teachers to propose their ideal week, and in LISD, Pondant asked principals to “poke holes” in the various scenarios being considered. “We want it to be air tight before we put it out there for parents,” she says.

One principal, she says, resisted the change based on concerns over a loss of instructional time and because he didn’t want students to choose between band or athletics. So Pondant challenged him to develop a plan until he found a scenario in which students didn’t have to choose. She adds that because students move through their core classes in a cohort — meaning all the football players might be together — some adjustments were needed to hold down discipline problems.

While the schools have some flexibility to implement a plan that works for them, there are also a few non-negotiables. They can’t change the start and end times of the day because those are determined by bus schedules, and classes can’t go down to 30 minutes. Next year, the district plans to spread the model to its third middle school and all seven elementary schools, and the plan is to phase in a “college-like” schedule at the high school.

Schmidt adds that, as with any new plan, things can go wrong. On the first day the new model was in place at Legacy, they ended up with a hole in which the entire student body was out of class for 20 minutes. So they fixed that, and now students follow their own schedules throughout the day without bells to tell them when to move.

School that looks different

Even in schools that keep traditional class schedules, there are ways to build in more flexibility, Crawford says. She adds that while some schools use block schedules to provide longer times

for instruction, those too can become restricting. “It’s not the bell schedule,” she says. “It’s what you do with it.”

She recommends that schools start with a group of teachers from different content areas who decide how to share and regroup students within the existing framework. “One teacher operating in isolation — that’s the beast that eats kids and eats teachers,” she says.

Platte County High School in Platte City, MO, began its “flexible personalized learning” program by combining classes in 9th-11th grade. For example, an English and government teacher will take the same two periods that they were using before, co-teach for one of them, and spend the second supporting students as they work in “independent learning time.” Meanwhile, the students are still getting credit for both courses.

“School just simply needs to look different,” says Assistant Principal Shari Waters. “It’s a focus on how we can help students learn to collaborate and advocate for themselves. We’re not holding them hostage in a seven-period day.”

At Platte County High, the flexible model is an option. A quarter of the school’s students — about 300 — are enrolled in it. Teachers who have been more reluctant to make the switch, Waters says, are worried their content area will be shortchanged or that they’ll lose some control. But she says that it’s not unusual for teachers to just give students “things to do” because they are used to filling up a specific block of time.

Opportunities for ‘different instructional strategies’

As Crawford notes, it’s how teachers and students use the extra time these models provide is what’s important. “The schedule actually sets up a ton of things for instruction,” she says.

In LISD, the flex periods allow art teachers, for example, to have much more time with students. “Art is important to a lot of kids,” Pondant says. “It keeps kids in school.”

At Legacy High, Kostelecky says teachers need to learn to plan for a week, not the next day.

“My goal is to have my classes at the same area of instruction by the end of the week, but each class will be slightly different throughout the week due to differing amounts of time each class has on a given day,” she says.

She also uses more formative assessments now to determine which students to keep for “call-back time.”

“I am more willing to use different instructional strategies, according to the needs for that particular class, because the classes are ultimately different each day already,” she says. “One class may need more direct instruction, while another class thrives on flipping the content and doing hands-on activities in class.”

Brett Mitchell, who teaches chemistry and physics at Legacy, says he always wished he could have more time for labs. Now he does. In an 80-minute period, he says, students can take more time with a lab, and he still has time to ask “critical questions before kids walk out the door.”

Forty-minute periods are great for combining students into the auditorium for a lecture or a presentation that they would all get separately in their classes anyway. The teacher who is especially strong on a particular topic can lead the class, and students, Schmidt says, get practice in learning how to ask a question in a large group. The school also now has an easier time bringing in guest speakers or industry experts, because they can meet with a large group of students in one 40-minute period instead of spending an entire day giving their talk to four different classes.

Mitchell agrees that there might be less time for instruction, but that doesn’t mean it’s less effective. “Your teaching is much more focused,” he says. “You know these are the important things I’ve got to hit.”

Prepared for college

Students also have to learn how to manage their time differently. At Platte County High, those in the flexible program might finish their homework during the school day, help other students and teachers with technology needs, or get their required amount of

physical activity. Physical education, Waters says, now takes more of a YMCA-like format with a list of classes from which students can choose. Some also use the time for doctor's appointments or taking their driver's test.

In a student focus group, Waters heard two girls taking the same AP English class compare their lives after school. One in a traditional seven-period day talked about having two to three hours of homework every night, while the other said she now has much more free time.

At Legacy High, some students use their independent time to take an extra class that they need or want. And Mitchell says the model especially benefits lower-income students. In the past, for example, the only time to get one-on-one time with a teacher for extra tutoring was before or after school — options that weren't realistic for students who ride the bus to school. Now they can meet with teachers or find help in a Saber Center during the day.

Those who do learn to use the time well, the teachers and administrators say, are much more prepared for college. "We are hoping this schedule will make college less of an adjustment," Kostelecky says, "because they already know how to manage their time when they leave high school."

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