

# Block Scheduling



An Illinois school found an effective way to provide intervention and enrichment by redesigning its master schedule.

Nicholas J. Myers

# That Gets Results

All children can learn. When principals and faculties truly embrace this core belief and openly demonstrate it to students, parents, and each other, dramatic improvements in academic performance can result. However, while it is certainly true that all children are capable of remarkable academic success, it is also true that learning occurs at different rates. This is demonstrated vividly with children traditionally considered as “at-risk.” But if we really believe that all children can learn, it is our responsibility to devise innovative systems to ensure that all children do learn. One place where this is occurring is Anne Fox Elementary School.

Fox School is a moderately low-income, demographically diverse school located in the working-class suburb of Hanover Park, Illinois. The student population is 34 percent white, 30 percent Hispanic, 17 percent black, and 19 percent Asian/Pacific Islander. More than 35 different languages are represented and the school’s low-income and mobility rates are double the district average. Until recently, Fox School ranked dead last in academic achievement among the district’s 21 elementary schools. But the incorporation of new support systems has produced dramatic increases in overall student achievement in each of the past two school years.

## A Troubled School

The road to improvement was not an easy one to navigate for a faculty that, until very recently, was experiencing great frustration over persistently low levels of student performance on local and state assessments. Over time, the school had come to be known as a district “problem spot.” Of greatest concern was the absence of effective systems to truly intervene for students exhibiting difficulty mastering grade-level concepts and skills.

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Lacking authentic data from well-designed formative assessments of student achievement, teachers were largely fending for themselves in the manner in which they assessed student progress and determined grade-level proficiency in targeted areas. Without rich data, there also was an absence of collaborative planning to develop intervention strategies for students in need.

The school relied on outdated and ineffective modes of remediating students struggling to grasp the essential skills required of all students exiting from a given grade level. The three main methods were: optional after-school tutoring groups; large-group pullout instruction using a canned literacy remediation program; and referral to a special education child study

team. The failure of these methods had caused the school to inch dangerously close to failing to meet the adequate yearly progress required by the No Child Left Behind Act.

If they were to turn the school’s performance around, the principal and staff would need to carefully examine the following questions:

- Have we clearly identified the essential outcomes in core academic areas that all children must have in place before moving to the next grade level?
- Have we developed meaningful, formative assessments that truly identify the specific learning needs of each child?
- Do we intervene the moment any child demonstrates difficulty mastering essential grade-level skills and concepts, or do we wait until children fail before placing them in remediation programs?
- Are our interventions by invitation or are they systematically built into our school day and delivered to all students in need of additional time and support?
- Do we wait until a child has an individualized education program before we provide additional time and support?

## Ninety Sacred Minutes

The need to devise new systems of support for the learning of all children needed to be addressed if past realities were to change. The first critical step involved teachers committing themselves to a learning environment built around a daily 90-minute literacy block for all children. Within that time frame, teachers in all classrooms could fully implement a comprehensive and balanced literacy model calling for guided, shared, and independent reading and





In this era of accountability, it is critical that we identify every child by name and need if we are to be successful in maximizing his or her learning potential. With all students receiving high-quality literacy instruction in a whole-class setting, grade-level teams could now administer regular formative assessments in order to determine the specific learning needs of all students and decide which were in need of intervention and which were ready for enrichment instruction.

### **Regrouping for Intervention and Enrichment**

To provide time for intervention and enrichment, we established a 45-minute parallel block for each grade level. During this time, all new instruction stops and students are regrouped by instructional need. Those in need of additional time and support to master an appropriate skill or concept move to a classroom where they receive structured, small-group intervention instruction. By using the school's special education resource staff, literacy coach, and an instructional assistant, we were able to maintain an adult-to-student ratio never exceeding 1-to-8. Students whose assessments show they are mastering skills are regrouped during the parallel block for enrichment instruction in a whole-class setting.

A wide variety of instructional practices are used during daily intervention block periods. Additional guided reading time, vocabulary lessons, and mini-lessons in formal writing are among the strategies employed by the grade-level teams for students identified in need of intervention. Students working in enrichment blocks benefit from differentiated instruction at their appropriate learning level. Literature circles and independent research projects are frequently used to push these students to heightened levels of academic performance. In addition, clustering students identified as gifted for 45 minutes each day has enabled a part-time gifted resource teacher to maximize her teaching time.

Teacher collaboration is a critical

writing, as well as vocabulary and word-study instruction. This ensured that all children received high-quality initial instruction from grade-level teachers.

Because we regarded the 90-minute literacy block as sacred instruction time that no child could afford to miss, we decided that the outdated and ineffective practice of pulling students out for remedial instruction during literacy instructional periods had to stop. Instead, remedial support was to be provided in the classroom, with responsibility shared by special education and regular classroom teachers. This

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practice ensured that all children were guaranteed exposure to the appropriate grade-level curriculum with an appropriate level of academic rigor.

component in ensuring that parallel block time is used to effectively meet the diverse learning needs of Fox School students. Grade-level teams begin the school year by setting goals in core academic areas, and are held accountable for the performance of their students. The results of formative assessments administered by each team are reviewed by the principal and posted in the faculty lounge for all to see and discuss. In addition, collaboration time is set aside for the staff to regularly discuss these critical questions:

- Which students are in need of intervention and which are in need of enrichment?
- What will daily lesson plans be for students in both intervention and enrichment blocks?
- How will we redistribute personnel to deliver this instruction effectively?

Finally, in order to provide teams with the time needed to collaborate around these and other critical questions, Fox School's master schedule had to be redesigned. Year after year, the wants and desires of our arts specialists had dictated how the master schedule looked and functioned. While the practice of building a vertical schedule, in which specialists teach in one grade level after another, provides them with ease in transitioning between periods, it also gives teachers in those grade levels minimal opportunities to meet and collaborate.

We needed to reassess our priorities and design a master schedule that provided frequent opportunities for common planning and uninterrupted blocks of time for core literacy instruction, as well as common blocks of time for intervention and enrichment. To achieve this, a horizontal master schedule was set up in which all sections of a grade-level team received specialist instruction at the same time. By scheduling in this fashion, grade-level teams were given two to three hours each week to meet and collaborate.

The parallel block system of intervention and enrichment has proved to be

an extremely effective way for the Fox School staff to systematically provide differentiated instruction to our diverse group of student learners. Today, every student is guaranteed a timely, structured intervention for each skill with which he or she is struggling—225 minutes per week within the school day. In addition, increased collaboration among the teaching staff has provided focus and direction for common planning meetings. Most importantly, Anne Fox School is truly living up to its primary responsibility of ensuring that all students have mastered the skills essential at a given grade level.

Our school has witnessed double-digit increases in student performance in each of the past two school years, as measured by the Illinois Standards Achievement Test, and is poised and motivated to achieve further success in the future. All children truly can learn if educators across the country have the courage to examine ineffective past practices and realign time and support in a way that ensures success. □

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#### WEB RESOURCES

“Designing Schedules to Support Professional Learning Communities” is a Winter 2007 *Leadership Compass* article. It explains how to make time in school schedules for common planning, teaching, intervention, and enrichment. [www.naesp.org](http://www.naesp.org)

The All Things PLC Web site provides research, articles, data, and tools to educators who seek information about professional learning communities. [www.allthingsplc.com](http://www.allthingsplc.com)



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