Parallel Block Scheduling Spells Success

Teachers’ concerns and wishes led the way for a district in Georgia to plan new class schedules to allow for miniclasses and enrichment labs—for all students. The result? Higher student achievement, better student behavior, and happier teachers.

Educators long have recognized that all too many students are, in effect, reading failures. In discussing how to address these students’ needs, teachers in the Wilkes County School System in Washington, Georgia, have been unanimous in their requests for smaller classes grouped by reading achievement.

In 1994, teachers, administrators, and central office staff in the school system devised a plan to respond to these requests at two schools, Washington-Wilkes Primary and Washington-Wilkes Elementary. Through a consensus-building process, we decided to use parallel block scheduling (Canady 1990, Canady and Rettig 1995). The following year, we implemented this plan in grades 2-4. In 1996, we added grades 1 and 5, and this past fall, we added kindergarten.

To target the common goals of reading and math, we combined local, state, and federal funds that we had previously used in isolation. Administrators also reallocated their funding sources to meet their needs for classroom space and sufficient faculty members.

The investment has paid off. In the past two years, standardized reading and mathematics test scores have risen significantly. For example, 2nd graders’ reading scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills rose from 36 in 1995 to 53 in 1997, and their math scores rose from 48 in 1995 to 71 in 1997. In addition, teachers have seen more on-task behavior and a reduction in the number and severity of student behavior problems. Washington-Wilkes Elementary School saw a 50-percent reduction in special education referrals from 1996 to 1997.

One Team Covering the Bases
How does parallel block scheduling work? Teachers work in teams; each team consists of three base teachers and one enrichment lab teacher. Each base teacher instructs some whole classes and some smaller classes during the day. During each time block, one base teacher instructs a whole class, the second teacher sends the biggest achieving half of his or her class to the enrichment lab, and the third sends the lowest achieving half of the third class to the enrichment lab. Thus the lab includes both high- and low-achieving students.

While half of the class works in the lab, each base teacher provides directed reading or math instruction to the other half of the class. For reading, teachers balance high-quality literature with explicit phonics instruction. This smaller group has a student-teacher ratio of no more than 14 to 1 (one-half of a class size of 28)—thus eliminating the need for meaningless seatwork. We also address individual students’ needs with ongoing assess-
ment and diagnosis, adjusting instruction based on the results.

In the one whole class, the teacher concentrates on language arts, including composition, handwriting, spelling, and English, as well as reading. (Some teachers teach explicit phonics skills during whole class instruction, then reteach and reinforce the skills through direct interaction with students in the smaller class.)

Instead of doing seatwork in the classroom while the teacher gives direct instruction to small groups, students go to the enrichment labs, where they engage in hands-on learning. In the labs, which are organized in cooperative learning centers, teachers focus on teaching students reading and math through science and social studies content. All students—including special education students—have equal access to the enrichment classes, which were once available only to advanced and gifted students.

We knew that for our program to succeed, our teachers would have to support the change wholeheartedly. Therefore, our central office staff and the teachers and administrators from both schools did their homework. We visited other schools that use parallel block scheduling, read articles, and watched a videotape on the subject.

An outside consultant worked with our teachers and administrators to help them adapt the model to their students' specific needs. Teachers in each grade level then collaborated in study groups to consider whether to go ahead with parallel block scheduling. The consensus was to try it.

Mixing and Matching

The two schools' administrators prepared the master schedules of the daily activities—physical education, music, library, and special education and gifted classes. They assigned teachers to base and enrichment lab positions.

Because it is vital to the success of parallel block scheduling that teachers be matched to the right position, principals asked teachers interested in becoming enrichment lab teachers to apply for these positions. These teachers should be creative and should welcome the challenge of integrating reading and math into science and social studies. Likewise, base teachers should want to teach the basics of reading and mathematics.

Next, the administrators teamed base teachers with enrichment lab teachers and scheduled common planning time for each team or grade level of teachers.

Support from Peers and Professionals

We knew that if we were to realize the full potential of the change from self-contained classrooms to block scheduling, we would have to change our curriculum and instruction. We also recognized that parallel block scheduling was not the only answer to our reading problems. Professional development has been an integral part of our approach.

Because what goes on in the class-

room is critical in determining whether students will be high or low achievers, our school system's reading specialist trained teachers in assessment and diagnosis and how to use the results to individualize instruction. The reading specialist also trained teachers in effective teaching methods for the new reduced student-to-teacher ratio.

During the first year of the program, teachers of 2nd-5th graders met once a month to discuss teaching strategies, classroom management, and assessment and diagnosis. They worked in teams to adjust their instruction for specific time blocks. This sharing of ideas was a vital part of our professional development plan. In fact, we asked teachers to demonstrate to their peers the strategies they found to be successful in their own classrooms.

To provide teachers additional support and to assess the effect of the new scheduling on their instruction, the reading specialist, together with the principal and assistant principal of each of the two schools, observed instruction. All five of us went as a group to each classroom, making it clear to the teachers that we were not there to evaluate them individually.

To record our observations, we developed a checklist, applicable for both base and enrichment teachers. The checklist includes the types of strategies

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and use of materials we expected to see in each type of classroom. For example, we expect to see reading methods like word drills, oral reading, and the use of library books. In writing instruction, we look for writing prompts, prewriting, and student checklists. We then use our observations to give general feedback to the teachers during the scheduled monthly meetings.

**Rising Expectations**

Our teachers have been pleased with the results of our new scheduling. They say they now have the time to individually assess students and to provide appropriate instruction, and that their students now have the time to benefit from that instruction. No doubt these are two reasons why reading and math skills have risen and off-task and disruptive behavior has waned.

A veteran 1st grade teacher, for example, reports minimal behavior and off-task problems. "The enrichment lab has broadened them even further," she says, "so that my 1st graders are more well-rounded and satisfied." Most of our teachers tell us they never want to go back to the old way of teaching. Our model has increased parent satisfaction, boosted teacher morale, and enabled us to establish high standards and to expect those standards to be met.

1 Wilkes County is a small county in Georgia, population 10,000. The city of Washington has half the county's population. In the primary and elementary schools combined, 58 percent of the students are African American, 41 percent are white, and 1 percent are Hispanic. The primary school serves 539 students, and the elementary school enrolls 420. About 62 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunches.

**References**


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