INNOVATION SCHOOLS CASE STUDY: Schedule and Calendar

Overview

Background and Impetus for Change. A long-standing tradition in Dennis-Yarmouth schools is the excellence of its award-winning arts and music programs. When many other school districts were eliminating these, this district, with strong community support, kept an emphasis on band, chorus and performing arts. At the Marguerite E. Small School in Yarmouth, staff recognized that the school’s master schedule failed to give teachers time for collaboration and learning; and many of its 330 fourth and fifth grade students were missing too much time on academics due to band or chorus rehearsals scheduled during the day. To begin to address these concerns, the staff revised the master schedule to allow teachers more common planning time in Professional Learning Communities for data analysis, curriculum writing and professional dialogue to address individual student needs. This helped but did not provide more learning time on academics for students. In 2010–11, when the Marguerite E. Small School in Yarmouth was awarded an Innovation Schools Planning Grant that included time/schedule autonomy, the staff chose to further address the dilemma of insufficient time on academics.

Forty minutes was added to the students’ school day which equals 17.5 additional school days per year. No additional time was added to the day for staff and specialists as they have a staggered start/end time which meets the contractual day of 6 hours and 30 minutes. This adjustment allowed staff to create the Enrichment Block for students at the end of the school day. Band rehearsals and chorus practice were moved to the Enrichment Block; and a student menu of enrichment activities was developed for all other students. An Innovation Schools Implementation Grant awarded in 2011–12 allowed staff to implement these changes and to reassess after each semester to make adjustments where needed.

“The Innovation Schools grant was a way for the district to increase its customer base when competition for schools was being impacted by charters, school choice, an aging community and decreasing enrollment. Our goal is to be seen as a district that is creative, innovative, trying to do new things while keeping students and their needs as the main focus. The timing is ideal at grades 4 and 5 to address the needs of at risk and other students before they go on to upper grades.”

— Superintendent

After two successful years implementing these changes, staff learned that a district reorganization would merge the Marguerite E. Small Innovation School with the Nathaniel H. Wixon School in Dennis beginning in September 2013. At that point, an intense planning effort began to ensure an efficient and effective transition. A team of teachers and parents met to talk about the important aspects of both communities to keep. Many notifications went out to the community and about 25 public meetings were held. The decision to continue as an Innovation School following the merger was by consensus of a focus group of parents, teachers, and administrators who had met four times to facilitate the reorganization. One hundred percent of teachers voted to continue as an Innovation School. Currently, the Nathaniel H. Wixon Innovation School (NHWIS) serves over 500 Dennis and Yarmouth students in grades 4 and 5, exclusively, and although the school year 2013–14 was the third year as an innovation school, it was the first year as a blended school.
BEFORE INNOVATION

Teachers' Contractual Day: 6 hours, 30 minutes

Students’ School Day: 6 hours 10 minutes

CURRENT INNOVATION SCHEDULE

Teachers' Contractual Day: 6 hours, 30 minutes, 2 different schedules

Classroom Teachers: 7:30 am–2:00 pm

Small Group Specialists and Related Arts: 8:25 am–2:55 pm

Students’ School Day: 6 hours 50 minutes

Students’ School Day is 8:00 am–2:50 pm

1. Students are with their classroom teachers from 8:00 am-2:00 pm. During this time they also have 7 related arts classes (Art 1, Art 2, French, Health, Music, PE 1, PE 2) These classes are scheduled in 50 minute blocks. Lunch and recess is 45 minutes, 20 minutes for recess and 25 minutes for lunch.

2. Students are in Enrichment Block classes with either small group specialists (reading teachers, special educators, ELL teachers), related arts teachers (Art, PE, Music, Health, Technology, French) or with classroom teachers that offer a class for an additional stipend. Each student’s Enrichment Block Schedule is individually developed based on assessment data, and student interest, collected through a registration process. The Enrichment block classes are semester based, with the schedules developed twice a year.

OTHER ADVANTAGES OF THEIR SCHEDULE

1. Common Planning Time: NWIS has seven PLCs. Each group has a team leader, a teacher who is paid a stipend to serve on the building and district leadership team. Each PLC has common planning time every day; one of those days is their PLC meeting. Each PLC has a common student learning goal based on assessment data, which they work on throughout the year.

2. RTI Block: From 10:15-11:05, all classroom teachers are in class with their students. Related arts teachers have a 50 minute prep period at this time. This allows the opportunity to provide tiered intervention, since students can be flexibly regrouped for targeted skill development. NWIS had a six week fourth grade writing initiative during this time, and based on assessment data, students were organized into small skill-based groups for instruction. One PLC used the time to regroup students for development of reading comprehension strategies. Staff looks forward to continuing to find ways to maximize the use of this time.

3. Additional 40 minutes added onto each student day: The 40 additional minutes added for students allowed the school to develop the Enrichment Block. Students gain wider exposure to skill development in their core classes as well as additional experiences in fitness and the arts. It allows NWIS students to choose to participate in band, orchestra, and/or chorus, without missing academic class time for rehearsals. If you multiply 40 minutes X 180 days, it is the equivalent of an additional 17.5 school days over the course of the year!

4. Remediation groups during the Enrichment Block are limited to three per week so that these children can participate in an enrichment activity of their choice on the other two week days. Specialists for remedial groups use data to identify students who need additional support and the schedule is prioritized to ensure these students are assigned to the appropriate remediation group. Interestingly, since all other students are in some type of enrichment activity during this block, these students are not aware that they are identified as needing additional help. Academic teachers are allowed to keep their students to extend classroom learning one time per week. This class is scheduled as part of the semester Enrichment Block schedule for each student in the class. Teachers appreciate this freedom to give students a "double dose” of instruction in ELL, - mathematics, science or social studies.
Autonomies

The approved autonomies/flexibilities through the innovation schools authorization process were in three areas: professional development, curriculum and instruction, and schedule/time. Following is a description of the processes and supports that have been instrumental to the success of extended learning time at NHWS, as well as challenges and lessons learned to inform others who plan to implement a similar complex change initiative.

Schedule/Time

Having innovation school status has resulted in a systemic shift through implementation of the master schedule and Enrichment Block that addresses teacher and student needs. Creating and adjusting the schedule is a tremendous task usually dealt with during the summer months by the Principal and Assistant Principal. During the first ten days of school in September any schedule conflicts are addressed with minimal changes to the master schedule. Students reported most of the time they get one of their top three choices from the menu of student activities that they complete to select their Enrichment Block (over 100 different topics/activities offered during the Enrichment Block, ranging from music options like keyboard, ukulele, jazz band, to yoga, art, and sign language, to Math Club, French Club, gardening, STEM, technology, and advanced chorus and drama).

District Vision/Support for Innovation Schools

The superintendent has been in the role for nine years, which has allowed this district to benefit from stable leadership. There is a Teaching and Learning Council at each school with strong teacher leaders who work collaboratively as a preK-12 team, and provide the “inside scoop” on what is needed in schools. A School Council provides the superintendent with the parent/community perspective. The District stepped in and resolved busing issues early on for the extended day schedule, and continues to provide late buses without which the extended day would not be successful. The District also budgets additional funding for stipends for teachers and enrichment providers. The superintendent shared other positive outcomes, like parents who are happy with the wealth of opportunities for kids; and parents who come in to share their knowledge and skills during Enrichment Block. She also noted the partnerships with Cape Cod Community College and Bridgewater State University, adding that college and career readiness is taken very seriously.

Benefits, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

Benefits for Students

Students think of the expanded learning time as part of the school day, and not an add-on; they appreciate that the Enrichment Block is “not just for fun” but also improves their learning. Students think it is a plus that their teachers get to teach something they enjoy or feel strongly about as well as academics. They especially enjoy making new friends from neighboring towns; and mentioned doing more project-based learning, getting to know other teachers, and learning about and discussing topics like world cultures, ancient cultures and national parks.

“If we didn’t have enrichment there would be a lot of empty space in our lives.”

— Student

Students are more energized and transition quickly and efficiently at the end of the day because they look forward to the Enrichment Block. Students shared that without the Enrichment Block, they would “get home too early and have nothing to do.” Another student shared: “There would be a lot of empty space in our lives if we didn’t have enrichment.” The Enrichment Block provides many opportunities for students to master the curriculum, as at-risk students and those who struggle with social/emotional skills receive additional support during this time from small group specialists. These teachers can meet with their groups an additional two times per week.

“It is good to have Dennis and Yarmouth students together ... I think they took the good parts of both schools.”

— Student

The superintendent is a champion for the extended day model and explained how the NHWS fits in the big picture vision of the Dennis/Yarmouth School District, a district that seeks to serve the “whole child”. She acknowledged that being an Innovation School brings a certain amount of pride because the school offers more than a traditional school, and the biggest advantage is quality of learning time with varied experiences for students during Enrichment Block. The goal of the Innovation Schools grant is similar to other grants the district has acquired — helping students experience being a typical 4th or 5th grader — to join the soccer club, learn ball handling — so when they go to high school they are comfortable to join co-curriculars as well as academics. “Confidence isn’t just about academics, so we make sure students have other opportunities that peers less at risk have naturally from family support. Our vision is to give all of this to all of the kids so they become confident students.”

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and fifth graders they might not have met. “This gives students another face in the crowd, and sends a good message to kids that people care about them here.” Teachers find that the extra time they have with students allows them to build relationships and assist students in discovering their natural talents. Teacher enthusiasm and sense of purpose is tangible here.
“The new science program this year was easier to implement because all my kids were right in front of me. We are doing radically different things.”

— Teacher

Teacher collaboration and cross-grade teamwork comprise the culture of the school. The school climate feels safe, behavior issues are down, student work is visible in the hallways, and teachers believe many kids feel this is a good place to be. Teachers credit the high visibility of the principal and assistant principal and believe that what they set out to create—a school that retains students here—has been realized.

Benefits for the Blended School Community
A byproduct of the Innovation Schools grant is a blended school community that everyone spoke highly of during interviews and focus groups. Students don’t differentiate themselves from others in different grades; they see themselves as “Wixon” students. Teachers feel responsible for all students and treat them as their own, and parents are thrilled students have choices and worthwhile activities during enrichment time. Principal Mezzetti stated the new space works beautifully for the Enrichment Block activities, which was readily seen during a tour of the school. Students have plenty of room for all types of creative learning such as mural making, science experiments and even outdoor space for gardening. It clearly takes everyone working together to keep this school humming, and it is well known that administrative assistants go above and beyond to ensure the split schedule and Enrichment Block run smoothly. The school community extends further through contracts with retirees and others from the local community to conduct enrichment classes. These include a retired science teacher, a chess enthusiast, and substitute teachers.

“The principal should be nominated for best principal of the world award ... she’s phenomenal. She knows every kid and always has a smile on her face ... and all the work they did last year for the transition ... three schools came together ... melding the cultures of different needs. They were unpacking it all summer. She’s always here, very receptive and responsive and you always get very thoughtful answers to questions.”

— Parent

Challenges
After each semester, staff review and tweak the model and address any challenges that arose to maintaining the extended day schedule with an Enrichment Block. Prioritization is always given to children who need small group remediation and if schedule conflicts arise, they are quickly resolved. Sometimes it is difficult to cover all of the Enrichment Blocks on Fridays as staff members are not as inclined to stay late, and some enrichment classes are overcrowded due to popularity. The principal provides extra staff in those classes as a solution, and she and the assistant principal fill in on Fridays. Sometimes people from the community who have volunteered to do an Enrichment Block become discouraged when too many kids show up and they don’t always return. An intense effort to find more community members willing to step up and give back to the schools is ongoing. Other challenges mentioned included the need to ensure that the content of the Enrichment Block is well thought out and purposeful so that this is beneficial time for all students. Teachers and parents discussed whether to implement some type of assessment or accountability for student learning during Enrichment Block. One parent had an “ah-ha moment” and shared: “I was thinking it would be nice to have an assessment ... but no, that’s not true, because during the school day everything has to be assessed ... teachers are constantly quantifying. The beauty of it is that there is no assessment ... teachers can take risks.”

Lessons Learned
When asked what advice they would give to another school or school district desiring to implement an extended school day, the Principal and Superintendent emphasized the importance of teacher buy-in and decision making by consensus. A lot of hard work is involved and a strong school culture needs to be established before the extended day is attempted. Teachers do the heavy lifting and need to feel supported at every turn. District support has been instrumental, but administratively there is a lot of additional work; you have to know your team will take it on. With the staggered start day, staffing is thin on both ends of the day, and subs and assistants are needed to cover. Additional district money is budgeted. * “We believe all kids should be in enrichment ... not just the top performing kids.”

“Students have a say in their schedule, which at this young age is so rare. As they work all day, they know that the day will end with what they love.”

— Parent

* It was noted that the District allocated an additional $30,000 in 2012-2013 to support the extended learning time model.