

Creating Flexible Structures for Learning

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Futurists say our middle school students might live to be 120 years old. As teachers, we must prepare them to function in a world defined by continual change. They have to be ready for anything.

When we use flexible organizational structures in our schools, we can create the right environment for expansive learning. We seek alternative views, not just the ones we find most comfortable. We maintain healthy skepticism of all practices, including the ones for which we are the loudest cheerleaders. We have the courage to do what's best, not what's easiest. We teach more than one topic if necessary, set up our own professional development opportunities, throw out the master schedule and start from scratch.

We also group students and courses according to need and re-examine those groupings on a regular basis. Is this lesson an opportunity for partners, individuals, or triads? Should we introduce an anchor activity with two or three mini-lessons? Will students be served better by heterogeneous or homogeneous groupings? Personally, I have found that students in heterogeneous classes make greater gains. Math seems to be the one exception. If your school or school district requires heterogeneous classes, what should you do? Try some of the outstanding differentiated instruction strategies recommended by Carol Ann Tomlinson, Sandra Schurr, and others. What we cannot do is bemoan the difficulty of reaching all learners, watch students perform poorly in our classes, then say "See, I told you so." Our students pass this way only once. We can't waste a single day.

Choosing the best options for students requires a staff commitment to excellence and elasticity. The professional culture of the school creates the environment for flexible organizational structures. As former Principal Roland Barth wrote in the March 1990 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*, "the quality and character of a school and the accomplishments of its students have more to do with the nature of the adult relationships in a school than with any other factor" It's up to the educators to cultivate those relationships.

When a teacher approaches an administrator with an idea for a new organizational structure or a request for flexibility, the principal should examine the idea in light of the staff's core values, the school's logistics, and the community's standards. Is it good for young adolescents? Given our resources, how can we make this work? Will this be acceptable to the local school board and parents?

In his book, *Leadership for the Schoolhouse*, Thomas J. Sergiovanni shows us that, by replacing the politics of division with the politics of virtue, which emphasize a shared commitment to the common good, students and teachers learn. Collaboration does take time. But the decisions we make are far more effective and our ability to model lessons is far more likely with this kind of approach. In a traditional schedule, all students move through the halls at the same time and there is no way to increase instruction time. Discipline problems mount, and subject integration is practically nonexistent. Fixed-length extended periods have problems, too, including the need for targeted staff training, and the inability to reduce time slots if we need to.



Bill Denney, a principal and middle school consultant, promotes a flexible block schedule, which allows teachers to adjust class periods as they see fit. Denney encourages us to think in terms of time equivalency: Ninety minutes a day for four and a half weeks is equivalent to spending 45 minutes a day for nine weeks in the same class. You can have back-to-back classes, each of them meeting 45 minutes a day for nine weeks, and students can take the courses concurrently. Or, you can quicken the progression during the school year by having intense four-and-a-half-week courses, followed by more advanced study in the same courses during the following four and a half weeks. If students fail a course, both options let them complete the required work and still move on with their classmates at the end of the year.

Flexible organizational structures keep our school interactions dynamic and substantive; Depending on the structure, we facilitate, integrate, advocate, and differentiate more effectively when we control the use of time, space, and resources. We can change the content, the process of mastering that content, or the products we use to demonstrate mastery when we have flexibility. We can get rid of the “us versus them” mentality because we’re working side by side with both students and teachers.

Consider this announcement I made to my classes recently: “I’m learning how to do a relational database of online book reviews for our school. I’m using Filemaker Pro 4.0 because the Access software is too expensive. It seems pretty user-friendly, but I need help understanding field relationships. Can anyone help me?”

In each period, four or five hands went up. We’ve started working. We’re in this together. What I do with my small group of database builders will directly affect my interactions with them in the regular classroom. We are committed to each other’s success by our shared challenge.

With flexible class periods and alternative meeting places, students have more opportunity to develop independence. Teachers have the luxury of delegating authority to students, which helps them become responsible for their own learning.

In middle schools, 80 percent of our students are operating at concrete levels, while research shows, that almost 80 percent of us teach at symbolic or abstract levels. What’s wrong with this picture? There’s a big gap between what we know works with young adolescents and what we choose to do in the classroom.

Learning is contextual. We need to apply knowledge and skills in other areas before we actually retain it for the long term. Limiting our subject to what happens inside the four walls of a classroom doesn’t come close to what students need to make sense of new ideas. The world is our classroom. We need to connect to it to teach our students well.

What are the possibilities? Check out the talents and expertise among your colleagues, your students’ parents, and the people in your community. Someone will have the skills and the time you need. Conduct a survey and publish a list of the faculty’s hobbies. Ask parents at open house events and conferences to indicate their skills and their availability. Call your local library for a list of speakers on various topics. Then use those lists! A few other ideas: field trips to sites where students can see



classroom topics in action; research internships; using multi-generational actors in the school play; and publishing a literary magazine or newspaper so students can observe and reflect on events that affect their lives.

The national debate about affective versus academic instruction wrongly assumes that we must choose one over the other. Adolescents need both kinds of guidance, and good middle schools provide them. One way to combine emotional and academic support is through outdoor education experiences. The best outdoor instruction challenges students to interact with the environment, attain difficult physical and intellectual goals, and build stronger relationships with the people who share their experiences.

Here are some outdoor units used successfully at schools in which I've worked. These are the course descriptions we offered during environmental excursions. They're not meant to be a blueprint but rather a catalyst for your own ideas.

Math as a Tool to Study Nature—From Water Flow to Tree Grow: With mathematics and lots of water work, you will determine average width, rate of flow, and depth of the creek. You also will examine the impact of the creek on the surrounding farms and forest and build your own miniature raft to use for timing purposes. Scientific, yet wet! Later, you will learn how to use protractors, geometry, and ratios to determine the heights of the tallest trees you can find.

Compass Conquests—Do you know how to follow a course with a compass? Are you a detective who's willing to solve logical challenges in nature? Get a new "angle" on fun! Join us as we set up our own version of Stonehenge and become compass experts. Learn to read a topographic map and solve a riddle on the point-to-point compass course.

Creek Study and the S.Q.I.—Stream Quality Indicators: Investigate the quality of streams. You'll examine the temperature, velocity, clarity, odor, and oxygen content, as well as the bugs and plants that make their homes in the stream. Learn about water contamination, both good and bad. Catch creek critters and identify them along with plants as you observe unique stream activities. Sneakers required. A fun and wet course! You will present a summary report of your findings to the faculty.

Simulations—Oh Deer, It's the Grizzly Bear Forest: In these two simulation games from Project WILD, students portray different animals coping with habitat changes such as limited food supplies, winter storms, and housing developments. Students will race each other as they represent members of a herd competing for food, shelter, and water. Students will graph the results of the herd's population gains and declines over a fictional 10-year period.

Outdoor Problem Solving -- This is a physical and mental course for those who like to solve logical and ethical problems. Activities include walking a forest trail blindfolded, tying knots, building campfires, disentangling partners hooked at the wrists, setting up a tent, and examining ethical issues in ecology.

Freedom Trail—This self-guided walk helps students learn about a fictional character escaping from slavery on a Virginia plantation.



Psychologist Jean Piaget told us that the very best teaching methods are often the most difficult. Creating and maintaining flexible organizational structures might be time-consuming, awkward, and contentious, but it is that back-and-forth sharing and demanding that helps our cause evolve. It can illuminate and inspire our efforts. In the end, we remain on the cutting edge of successful response to the needs of young adolescents. Regular and thoughtful flexing of our organizational structures is not unlike flexing one's muscles—both exercises strengthen and tone the body in which they're used. And both give us the ability to reach farther than ever before.

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