

Free At Last: Making the Most of the Flexible Block Schedule

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In my eighteen years of teaching grades four through eight, the two years prior to my transition to university teaching (1993-1995) were some of the most exciting of my teaching career. This excitement was due, in major part, to Madeira Junior and Senior High School's implementation of a flexible block schedule for the seventh and eighth grades.

Madeira's interest in The Coalition of Essential Schools and a large increase in enrollment presented us with the opportunity to change many of the things that had frustrated us in a traditional junior high school setting. One of the first struggles that emerged during the planning stage was designing a daily schedule. Most of the teachers on the committee had little or no experience with the overwhelming complexity of school scheduling. All we knew was that we did not like the one we had: a nine-period day with 42-minute sessions was hardly conducive to serious learning. Hank Ohnmeis, the assistant principal, and Tony Dunn, the guidance counselor, were the committee members who came to our rescue. They labored through five revisions of a block schedule until they developed one that was acceptable to all. The final version was a flexible block schedule that contained two-hundred-eighty minutes of time for teams to schedule any way they thought appropriate.

Figure 1 graphically illustrates the Eighth Grade Team schedule and its incarnations. The following are descriptions of the ways we utilized the flexible block schedule.

The Basic schedule, represented in the first column, simply divided the available time into four equal periods of approximately 70 minutes each. During these periods, the core classes of language arts, social studies, math, and science were taught by the team's teachers. The encore classes consisted of art, band, chorus, computers, foreign language, and physical education. Teachers who worked with grades seven through twelve taught these classes. Encore classes, scheduled to fit into the high school's schedule, eliminated the problem of over-lapping between the junior and senior high schools.

The second column of Figure 1 illustrates the Rotation schedule. All of us have had classes that we wished we could see at a different time of day—and probably, students who wished they could see us at a different time of day. By rotating the core groups through the schedule, we could do just that. Some weeks, we simply kept moving the core groups through the schedule until every group

Figure 1

Variations on a Block Schedule				
Basic	Rotation	Squish	Flex	Event
7:40 Core 1	Core 4	Core 1 Core 2	Speaker(s) Program	Unit Culminating Events
8:50 Core 2	Core 1	Break Core 3 Core 4	Film Test Core 1 Core 2	Field Trip
10:10 Core 3	Core 3			
11:20 L	U	N	C	H
11:50 Core 4	Core 3	Activities	Core 3 Core 4	
1:05 Encore 1 (every day for students)	Team Planning (every day for teachers)	Encore 1 Team Plan	Encore 1 Team Plan	Encore 1 Team Plan
1:55 Encore 2 2:45 (every day for students)	Individual Planning (every day for teachers)	Encore 1 Indv. Plan	Encore 1 Indv. Plan	Encore 1 Indv. Plan



had met at a different time. Other times, we needed to meet with a particular group at a particular time. We then froze the rotation to accomplish this. When the students or teachers felt the need for a change, we frequently used this schedule.

The schedule we used most often while we were working on our integrated thematic units was the Squish schedule. We named it so because we squished the four core classes into the block of time preceding lunch. The block after lunch became time to work on activities related to the unit. The third column of Figure 1 shows for this schedule. Readers will note that there is a break scheduled between Cores 2 and 3. We typically did this every day because we were well aware of the lengthy amounts of time we were requiring our students to stay in one place.

The Flex schedule is similar to the Squish schedule except that we scheduled the core classes around any special programs we may have had that day. An example of this schedule can be seen in column four of Figure 1. This schedule readily accommodated assemblies, speakers, films, and tests. Many of us felt frustrated when we missed classes because of assemblies or tried to arrange for all of our students to listen to a speaker at one time. I preferred to show a long film once, rather than showing it over many periods several times a day. Other teachers found it useful to give all of our students a major test at one time. The flex schedule offered us the time to do these things and more.

Figure 1's last column presents the Event Schedule. We often used this schedule for our culminating activities at the end of our integrated thematic units and for field trips. The final day of our units involved such activities as festivals, period dances, marches, sing-alongs, cook-outs, and contests, all done in full costume. These days typically required our entire block of time and, often, the encore periods. With this schedule, arranging field trips was easy. We could leave school at 8:00 AM and return by 1:00 PM without anyone aware of our absence. These were the days students and teachers remember for a long time.

While the flexible block schedule provided us with power and control we had never previously experienced, its arrival was not without some consternation. All team members spent the summer prior to implementation worrying about how to utilize effectively the time given to us. The math, science, and social studies teachers were given almost double the amount of time they were used to, while the language arts teacher lost almost a quarter of an hour. To reduce the language arts teacher's anxiety, the other team members offered to incorporate more reading and writing activities across the curriculum. Team members gathered and shared articles and lesson plan ideas on using longer periods of time effectively.

Several parents and students had other concerns. Some thought the classes were, too long for this age group. Others feared that students would be given too much time to do homework and not have any work to do out of school. Still others voiced disquiet over the elimination of study halls and limited opportunities to take elective courses such as foreign language. To dispel parents' anxieties, the team put together a presentation for "Back to School" Night, the beginning of the school year open house, entitled "Then and Now." This presentation included overheads comparing the previous schedule with the new one. Team members discussed the benefits students had by having fewer teachers and increased communication between teachers about homework and testing.



Parents who continued to voice concern about the schedule were invited to observe classes any day or time. The school board added a foreign language option for encore classes the second year. The team scheduled study periods on the occasions when students requested them. Teachers focused on active learning and incorporated two or three different activities into each period.

While not all concerns were addressed to everyone's satisfaction, the flexible block schedule provided the team with more ample time to meet the educational needs of our students. The two major benefits of implementing the flexible block schedule for teachers and students were improved instruction and communication. The team teachers shifted their teaching away from content coverage to teaching for understanding due to longer periods of instructional time. What one teacher was teaching in one class was reinforced or applied in another as a result of increased communication between teachers. Most importantly, student problems, concerns, and successes were shared and dealt with more effectively than they had been before by a small group of caring teachers.

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