



TO: Pleasantdale Board of Education
FROM: Mr. Griffin Sonntag, Principal at Pleasantdale Middle School
DATE: October 9, 2019
SUBJECT: Middle School Schedule Update (Executive Summary)

This Executive Summary provides an update on the implementation of the new master schedule for the 2019-2020 school year.

Background:

The impetus for reviewing the existing schedule is predicated within the District's Strategic Blueprint. In the Building Human Capital goal area, one of the action steps states, "*Establish building and district schedules allowing staff the time to have the greatest impact on teaching and learning.*" In addition, over the past year and a half, I have observed challenges that have been brought on by certain nuances contained within the master schedule. In the end, a priority for our building from a teacher and administrative point of view was to review the current master schedule and make improvements for our students.

The largest change to the schedule is having moved from a nine (9) period day to a ten (10) period school day. To develop the schedule, we followed a process which allowed for input from staff through staff and department meetings. A voluntary Schedule Committee made up of three teachers, Mrs. Malatt, and me then drafted the new schedule. Finally the committee shared the draft schedule with the entire staff in April for feedback and adjustments before finalizing the new schedule for Board approval and eventual implementation.

In April, a draft of the schedule was presented to the Board. The priorities presented to the Board are (not in priority order):

1. Additional time for math

In 5th and 6th grade, math time will be very similar to our current schedule, but the additional time will be daily, instead of every other day. In the 7th and 8th grades, math will be a double period.

2. Classes meeting every day instead of some classes meeting every other day

Spanish, resource, and intervention (math/reading lab) classes will meet daily.

3. 5th-grade flexibility to support student transition to middle school

This proposed schedule will allow 5th-grade teachers the flexibility to adjust their schedule during the day in order to best meet the needs of our youngest students in the building. This allows for a smoother transition for students and eases them into a middle school schedule.

4. Grade level specials classes back-to-back

When teaching very different topics to different grade levels, placing the specials classes back to back will help the setup and preparation for the teachers and maximize the time for student learning in these areas.

5. Spanish every day in every grade level

When learning a new language, daily usage has been shown to be the most effective way. In the new schedule, all grade levels will have Spanish every day (instead of every other day for 5th and 6th grades).

6. Co-planning and curricular meeting time during the school day

We believe that we are stronger and better when we work together. By having co-planning and curricular meeting time during the school day, we will be able to better devise, develop, and differentiate lessons and units to meet the individual needs of our students.

As with any new change lessons are learned upon implementation. Below you will find what has been learned after implementation of the new schedule during the first seven (7) weeks of school:

Positives:

The greatest positive impact with the new schedule is all of the priorities listed above are being implemented. Both students and staff are seeing and feeling the effects of this implementation. Some highlights of these success can be found below:

Additional time for math

One of the goals of extending the daily time in math is to provide more students the opportunity to achieve at higher levels of math while in middle school. In 5th and 6th grades, having approximately one hour of math time every day is a positive difference for the teachers and their lessons with the students compared with having a double period of math time other day. The 7th and 8th-grade math teachers report also very positive effects of having a double period of math for the courses they teach. There is time to accomplish things during class with all of the students instead of assigning it for homework where students must attempt to independently complete the exercises.

Classes meeting every day instead of some classes meeting every other day

When learning a new skill or information, continuity of learning is critical. The new schedule allows for this continuity in Spanish, Resource, and Intervention classes. Under the previous schedule, a larger portion of class time was devoted to review rather than learning new content. This problem has been addressed under the new schedule. Finally, the new schedule is easier to follow. Teachers and students are no longer confused as to what “color” day schedule they need to follow as they did in our nine-period day.

Supporting the transition to middle school

The 5th-grade team implemented a “Home Base” time for students to support the

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transition to middle school. During the first three weeks of school, teachers scheduled a daily Home Base. Home Base activities included tours of the school, get to know you activities and team building, which have led to a smoother transition and help students acclimate to the middle school environment. We believe these activities have helped promote the students' success early on in their time here. Fifth grade teachers plan to continue these important lessons during Tuesdays and Thursdays going forward because they have seen how valuable the lessons are for the students. Not only do students engage in SEL lessons centered around getting to know oneself and each other, but there are lessons supporting executive functioning, how to be the best student you can be, and how to build good study habits at home.

Two components in the new schedule have allowed fifth grade teachers to implement Home Base. These components include large uninterrupted blocks of time and a team of teachers whose only responsibility is teaching 5th grade. The flexibility within the new schedule, has allowed fifth grade teachers to implement this "Home Base" and adjust their daily schedule times with the students. In the spirit of full transparency, when "Home Base" occurs, the math and science classes are 53 minutes long. The teachers believe this time is very well spent and are very comfortable accomplishing the curricular objectives in math and science in the time allotted.

Grade level specials classes back-to-back

The students have multiple specials classes in a row as they travel to the other side of the building. In terms of teacher set up, having multiple grade-level classes back-to-back eases with the setup, especially in a class like art in which the grade levels may be completing very different projects. This configuration also provides for students to use different parts of their brain for an extended period of time during the day. This configuration is aligned with how specials are scheduled at the elementary school.

Spanish every day in every grade level

The students in the 5th and 6th grades are getting double the amount of exposure to the Spanish language and instruction through the new schedule. This will undoubtedly build a more solid foundation for future Spanish learning and supports students' success in acquiring the language. Since having daily interaction with a different language is the best way to learn it, this supports this best practice. The only concern I have heard from students is that now they may have Spanish homework due the next day, where last year, they would have had two days to complete their assignments.

Co-planning and curricular meeting time during the school day

This might be the most exciting positive that I continue to witness as a result of the new schedule. As I walk the halls, our teachers are working together to collaboratively plan lessons for our students. Some of the conversations in these co-planning times are centered around learning targets and how to meet the needs of all of our learners through differentiated instruction. Some teachers are beginning to share the responsibilities for modifying assignments and assessments for their students. Whether it is teachers in the same department or teachers who are co-teaching ELA or math, we are working together

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to create the very best lessons for our students. I believe this will pay big dividends for our students as this continues to support the development of all of our teachers.

Unintended Consequences/Challenges/Differences From What We Expected:

As was said multiple times throughout the process of developing a new schedule, “there is no perfect schedule in any middle school.” Priorities must guide what is implemented. Until one lives a new schedule, there will inevitably be unintended consequences that occur. As the principal of the building, I must listen carefully to feedback from a variety of sources. The goal is to obtain the fullest understanding of these unintended consequences and make adjustments, when possible, along the way. Below are some of the unintended consequences/challenges/differences that have arisen so far:

Adjusting lessons to fit new time constraints

With classes going from 43 or 44 minutes to 39 or 40 minutes, some classes have lost approximately 10% of their instructional time with students. How has this impacted these classes? Teachers are seeing this impact and are having to adjust their lessons accordingly. We’ll continue to monitor this and continue to seek feedback from teachers on the impact on their classes and learn what adjustments they are making.

Limitations to the students enrolled in both math and reading lab

In a perfect schedule, there are some students who would benefit from multiple interventions built-in to their school day. Unfortunately, the new schedule doesn’t permit this to happen. A challenge in situations like these is determining what the child would have to give up in his/her schedule. In the past few years, these classes would be offered every other day so that students could receive teaching in these areas through separate classes during these times. The feedback was that having the classes every other day didn’t provide the continuity of instruction for many of these learners.

The solution at this point is for students with IEPs who have a daily resource period to receive their targeted additional instruction through this daily class. Students who receive intervention and would benefit from both reading and math intervention have been enrolled in reading intervention to build these foundational skills. The math intervention will be provided in a variety of ways through the regular math class.

Adjustment for Physical Education Classes

The process of preparing for PE lessons is time consuming. The process includes students changing for class, taking attendance, giving directions, walking to the fields, play, walking back across the street, and changing for the next class. Teachers have made adjustments and are managing the change.

Impact on Time at Lunch

Our school recognizes the importance of a recess period for students. As such it was our

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goal to maintain the current lunch/recess configuration where students have half the period for lunch and half the period for recess. However, students have felt the squeeze of shaving a couple of minutes from our lunch/recess periods. I am working with the student council to identify solutions and make our lunch lines more efficient in order to maximize the amount of time for students to eat. We will continue to investigate ways to solve this issue moving forward.

Extended Resource Student Schedules

As you may know, three years ago, we created programming for students who benefit from having their instruction outside of the general education setting. Extended Resource is a wonderful way for our students to be included in our school and in their home community. As the needs of our students present themselves across grade levels, creating a schedule that works for these students and their teachers has proved challenging but has been accomplished. I want to highlight the flexibility demonstrated by all of our special education teachers and aides to make this work well for our students. We appreciate all they are doing to support our students in including them as much as is appropriate.

Summary:

Overall, we believe the implementation of the new schedule for the 2019-2020 school year has been successful. Anytime there is change, difficulties may present themselves. I am very proud with how the staff has adapted to the changes and continue to dialogue about what they are seeing. They are providing ideas and solutions and this is at the core of the shared leadership we continue to build between the staff and the principals.

As stated multiple times above, we will continue to monitor the implementation and seek feedback from students, parents, and staff members as our year progresses.