

This series of resources presents effective practices implemented by some of the 27 schools involved in the original High School Flexibility Enhancement Pilot Project (HSFEPP) as they explored ways to use flexibility to increase student engagement and achievement and to support quality teaching in their schools.

This series represents a sampling of the effective practices being implemented in redesign schools across the province.

FOCUS BLOCK

Students need choice and a greater say in their education,” says Courtney Lawrance of St. Joseph High School in Grande Prairie. “Students need to be able to pursue subjects of interest in more depth or receive additional help for those in which they struggle.”

What is a Focus Block?

Following the foundational principle of Flexible Learning Environments, staff at St. Joseph High School in Grande Prairie have built into the day a 30-minute long flex or Focus Block. “We call it ‘Focus,’” explains Courtney Lawrance. “Students are provided with the opportunity to make choices about their learning during this time. Students can receive additional instruction from any teacher in our building; work independently or cooperatively with their classmates; or participate in extra-curricular activities. In addition, Focus creates opportunities for credit recovery.”

A student at the school describes Focus Block as a valuable practice that allows students to further their learning in a way that they choose. One parent describes her daughter’s use of Focus as a time to catch up on work, get extra help and do homework. Another parent sees it through her daughter’s eyes as “a great idea. [Focus] enabled her to go get help from her teachers whenever she needed it.”

“The Focus Block is a time to learn and expand knowledge and get help without having to pay for it,” says Lawrance.

What the data showed

Student remarks:

“This practice ... is smart and helpful and has taught me so many learning skills.” Her remark that “it saved my school career” is in itself remarkable.

“It gives kids a chance to steer their own choices for extra help/learning, and ultimately gives you the responsibility to achieve your own success.”

For more on Focus Block, contact:

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MORE RESOURCES IN THE EFFECTIVE PRACTICES SERIES: Building Communities in the School · Collaborative Partnerships · Continuous Progress Courses · Flex Block for Course Completion · Flex Program · iPLAN · Mastery Learning & Task Design · Ongoing Feedback · Personalized Learning Time · Pods for Learning · Student-Led Conferences · Teacher Advisor · Teacher Advisory Program · Teacher Advisory System · Teacher Collaborative Time · Teacher Professional Planning Time · Team Teaching & Collaboration

Parent remarks:

“My kids like Focus Block. They get better marks, have higher self-esteem, and a better attitude about learning; and they feel that they’re smart enough to go to post-secondary education.”

“I hear kids mention Focus Block and how they are using it. Lots of kids are utilizing it.”

“I want to have some teachers more available to students for extra help.”

“Continued flexibility in the education system is the answer for the future (including cyber-school, adjustments for the many types of learners, flexible schedules to support the busy lives of families).”

How success is measured

Data at the school tells staff that students value Focus Block time. Students have an average attendance rate of 80 per cent in Focus Block each day. Students respond positively when asked about Focus Block through surveys or personal interviews. Into its second year, Focus Block attendance has remained at a high level.

The success of the flexible learning environment at St. Joseph High School is apparent from the way students, parents and teachers enthuse about the Focus Block. Lawrance also has some numbers to back up the anecdotal information. She says, “Our statistics come from tracking the number of students leaving during Focus Block to engage in our school community. Programs like First Responders, Destination Imagination, and Canada Skills have grown as a result of this time. High School students are very busy, and Focus Block provides time to become involved to a greater degree. Students have been able to recover credits/courses by taking advantage of this time.”

What we learned

Lawrance notes that, “We are coming to refine our practice. We would like to continue to develop our credit recovery opportunities, and we are looking at exam week in January providing additional time to work with students to complete courses.”

One student noted that there is no need to change the practice at all: “It is amazing!”

