

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.

PERSONALIZED LEARNING TIME & SEMINAR TIME

Four years ago our dropout rate was 4.3 per cent; only 72.4 per cent of our students were completing high school in three years, and Rutherford Scholarships were won by less than 50 per cent of our students,” says Principal Darlene Marcinkevics of Spruce Grove Composite High School. “More and more students were disengaged.”

Today the dropout rate is 2.3 per cent and 80 per cent of student finish high school in three years. Almost 70 per cent – 68.7 per cent – of students are awarded Rutherford Scholarships. How did Spruce Grove Composite High School make this dramatic change?

The school recognized that students needed flexible opportunities to connect with teachers. Two practices which proved effective were Personalized Learning Time (PLT) and Seminar Time. A related practice, for which there is another Effective Practices tipsheet, was Teacher Collaborative Time.

What is Personalized Learning Time?

“Personalized Learning Time (PLT), a two hour block of time that occurs twice a month, allows students to connect with teachers on how they are doing and to get help if needed. They are free to work on things that they want; however, teachers may have them use this time to redo assignments or complete missed work,” says Marcinkevics.

Students can rewrite assignments or exams (or parts of exams) for mastery learning; spend more time in areas they are struggling with; work on project based learning and enrichment opportunities; and explore self-directed learning and self-advocacy.

PLT can be teacher driven too. If deemed necessary, teachers may have students use this time to complete assignments, redo assessments, or get remedial help with course material. A student noted the feeling of success due to being able to see his teachers during non-class time: “I live on an acreage, so I need to take a bus home. It’s not always possible to stay after school. The vast length of the block (2 hours and 7 minutes) does not restrict me to seeing only one of my four teachers; rather I can meet with all of them if I need to. Being able to take another stab at certain assignments and exams, and having enough time to do it, is also a bonus.”

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What is Seminar Time?

Seminar Time occurs at the end of each day. It is a regular, daily block of 40 minutes during which students can meet with any of their teachers to ask questions to improve their understanding. Students may also use this time to work on homework and to connect with classmates for project work or to work in a large learning area to catch up. Students have busy lives and often think they understand a concept, but when they go home to do their homework, they can’t answer the questions; Seminar Time provides access to teachers and peers that might not otherwise happen.

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How success is measured

The school collected hard numbers from the accountability pillar, School Logic generated reports, the *TELL Them FROM Me* Survey and focus group sessions with students and parents. Four years after implementing the effective practices, Spruce Grove Composite High School sees significant achievement:

- High school completion 3 years: 80%
- Dropout rate: 2.3%
- Rutherford Scholarships: 68.7%

Academic success on blended diploma marks for all students ranges from:

- 94.4% successful completion to 100% successful completion varying throughout subject areas.
- Very positive comments from students that they could not be without PLT and Seminar Time.
- Very strong parental support for student personalized program.

“Teachers spend time sharing and creating Assessment As Learning tools/activities, so that at all times students know what the target is, where they are in their learning, ‘what they know and don’t know,’ and where they need to go to get the help they need.”

*Darlene Marcinkevics, Principal,
Spruce Grove Composite High School*

What we learned

The staff will continue to find more opportunities for students to connect with teachers or subject specialists. The school intends to provide and pursue:

- more time for teacher collaboration
- continued involvement in “High School Redesign” to support new schools coming on board
- opportunities to participate in curriculum prototyping as per proposal put forth by Calgary School Board, which is forming a “consortium”
- time to dig deeper into project-based learning, cross curricular outcomes, engaging students in relevant meaningful activities, improving AFL [Assessment for Learning] and AAL [Assessment As Learning] strategies; and providing more student choice and opportunity to “own their learning”

Marcinkevics adds, “Teachers spend time sharing and creating Assessment As Learning tools/activities, so that at all times students know what the target is, where they are in their learning, ‘what they know and don’t know,’ and where they need to go to get the help they need.”

One parent also noted the viability of offering PLT on a daily basis, which is an intriguing idea sparked by learning about the daily Flex Block offered at Mother Margaret Mary School, Edmonton Catholic Separate School District.

From the student perspective, the schools’ shift from slotting PLT in the morning to its current time slot in the afternoon “has proven to be even more effective because the entire student body has no excuse to leave school early because they have “nothing to do.” Teachers will assign work to be done in PLT if students have nothing to catch up on or redo in PLT time.

Grade coordinators also patrol the halls, which is good motivation for students to be in a room doing school work. “I don’t think any more tweaking needs to be done at this time. This set-up seems to be working well for now. The PLT system is a good way to help students be successful.”

For more on Personalized Learning Time, contact:

Darlene Marcinkevics, Principal
Spruce Grove Composite High School, Spruce Grove
www.psd70.ab.ca/schools/SGCHS

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