

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.

PODS FOR LEARNING

At James Fowler High School,” states Principal Keith Johnson, “student drop-out rates were high, and students were saying that high school did not always interest and motivate them. We wanted students to stay in their classes and programs, and we felt that building a community of learners would encourage motivation, personalization, success and retention.”

What are Pods for Learning?

Duane P. Arndt, Knowledge and Employability learning leader, describes Pods for Learning as “distinct groups of students who have similar learning styles, interests and needs, and who are taught by the same teachers.” Four distinctive pods at James Fowler are: Advanced Placement (AP), Arts-Centred Learning (ACL), Knowledge and Employability Courses (K&E), and English Language Learning (ELL).

Patti Trussler, Teacher and Learning Leader, explains, “In our English Language Learning pod, we have approximately 200 students, at varying levels of literacy and numeracy. Students with lower language proficiencies are grouped for not only their English language learning, but also their social studies, math and science courses. This enables us to address both their academic needs and their language learning. Those with higher language proficiencies have their English and their social studies classes together, to allow for exposure to Canadian Studies, to be followed by Alberta Education’s social studies curriculum.”

[Pods for Learning are] distinct groups of students who have similar learning styles, interests and needs, and who are taught by the same teachers.

Duane P. Arndt, Learning Leader, James Fowler High School

Why the school implemented Pods for Learning

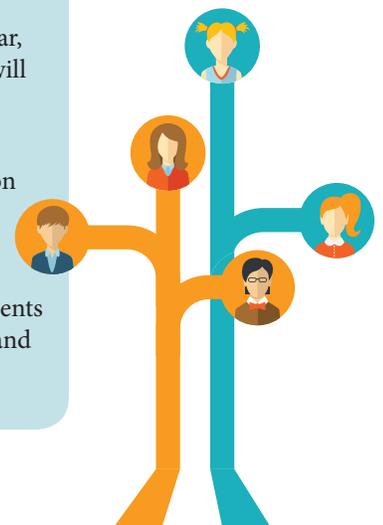
At James Fowler, there was a concern around students transitioning successfully between Grades 9 and 10, and the Pods for Learning were one way of providing some consistency and focus for the students.

Trussler explains, “Students who are new to both learning in the English language as well as living in Canada need ongoing support. Nationally 70 per cent of this group drops out of secondary school, but they have neither the language skills nor the employability skills for either adult learning or the workplace. Pods provide students with the opportunity to fill in their learning gaps.”

According to Arndt, “In the Knowledge and Employability pod we have grouped 50 incoming Grade 10 students into two different groups. We have a group of approximately 25 students who are taking Social 10-4 and Science 10-4 and another 25 students taking Math 10-4 and ELA 10-4. The teachers for these classes have prep periods opposite of the classes they are partnered with, so they can collaborate with cross-curricular activities.”

“Then by scheduling all 10-4 classes in the morning, the Pod teachers can easily have the students participate in field trips that explore career options and help the students understand cross-curricular, community and workplace connections to their classes. We also believe multiple off-site field trips will help reduce some of the social anxiety and stress that these students experience in the community and workplace. In addition, students do not miss other classes and instruction while off site.”

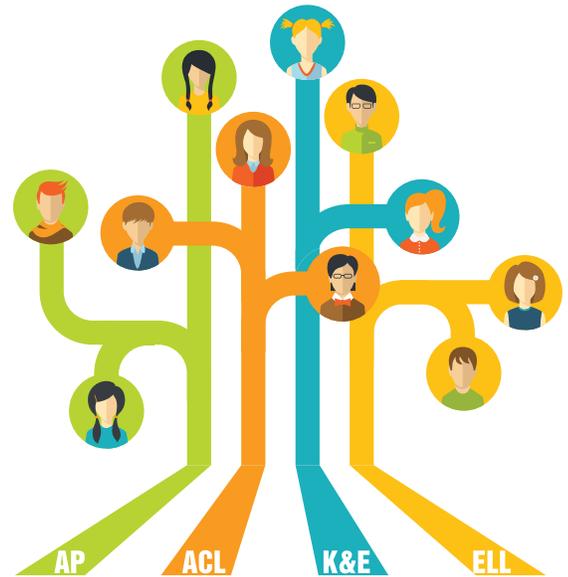
“The students taking Knowledge and Employability courses often require extra time and instruction to be successful. By placing them in the pod, the teachers have the flexibility to work together on many concepts and outcomes, in a personalized way. For example, our data showed students were not obtaining their Certificate of High School Achievement because of an inability to find and/or maintain work experience or practicum placements. Another reason was the struggle that the students encountered in completing HCS 3000 Workplace Safety. As result of these findings, the ELA 10-4 and Science 10-4 teachers are helping the students complete the HCS 3000 module in their classes.”



How success is measured

The school measures success in many ways. Over 80 per cent of the Grade 12 English Language Learners apply to return for an additional year of high school, suggesting they feel they are benefitting from the programming they receive at the high school, and that they have the motivation to continue their studies. “We also are seeing an increased number of students who transition to adult learning centres, such as Bow Valley College and Chinook Adult Learning Centre,” says Trussler.

Other measures include improved high school completion and reduced drop-out rates, as well as increases in personalization of student learning, in students obtaining a Certificate of High School Achievement, and in students receiving work experience or workplace practicum credits.



“We wanted students to stay in specialized classes and programs, and we felt that building a community of learners would encourage motivation, personalization, success and retention.”

Keith Johnson, Principal, James Fowler High School

What we learned

Principal Johnson sees one way of improving the Pods for Learning practice to be increasing cross-curricular task design and increasing the student work on inquiry.

Trussler notes that “Our teaching team is constantly working with the greater school staff (teachers, administrators, counsellors and staff support) to better streamline both the intake and welcome format for families new to our school. We invite parents to our school for registration information and for questions and concerns regarding their student’s educational pathway.”

“We also try to streamline the learning environment itself. For example, we meet as subject-specific teams (science, social studies, math) with our English language department to re-assess the scope and sequence of the content and overall expectations. We regularly offer ‘sheltered’ classes (ELL Science 10, Social Studies 10, Math 10 and English 10) to help bridge the content as well as the language needs of our ELL students. Collecting longitudinal data, for those students who leave our program, and ultimately, our building, would help inform further programming decisions.”

Arndt says, “I think it would be beneficial to the students taking 20-4 academic classes next year to be placed in a Pod model of instruction. It would increase students understanding of cross curricular, community and workplace connections. Also, the pods would give teachers increased flexibility.”

For more on Pods for Learning, contact:

Keith Johnson, Principal
James Fowler High School, Calgary
schools.cbe.ab.ca/b825

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