

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.

## TEACHER ADVISOR

Five years ago, when we started the High School Flexibility project,” says Norb Baharally of William E. Hay Composite High School in Stettler, “we conducted a survey with our students and asked them if they had a significant relationship with a teacher in the school. Fifty-two percent indicated they were neutral or disagreed with this. We decided that personalization and building relationships would be a pillar upon which we would build our flexibility program.

### What is the Teacher Advisor (TA) system?

At William E. Hay Composite High School, the TA system assigns all teachers from Grades 9 to 12 to work with a cohort of students throughout the students’ high school experience. The purpose of the system is to personalize learning and build relationships with students, over time. The students are linked with the teacher advisor, and they stay with this cohort throughout their high school experience. The school calls this process “looping.”

The TA meets with the advisee and parents for 20 minutes each semester. This meeting is in addition to the regular parent-teacher meetings. Teachers have found that oftentimes these meetings can be emotional for parents who are hearing for the first time about their student’s hopes and dreams and plans for the future. Staff facilitate this conversation with some guiding questions that they can discuss with parents. Many parents don’t know the kind of help their child needs as they finish high school, and the TAs are able to help parents find this information.

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*Norb Baharally, Principal, William E. Hay Composite High School*

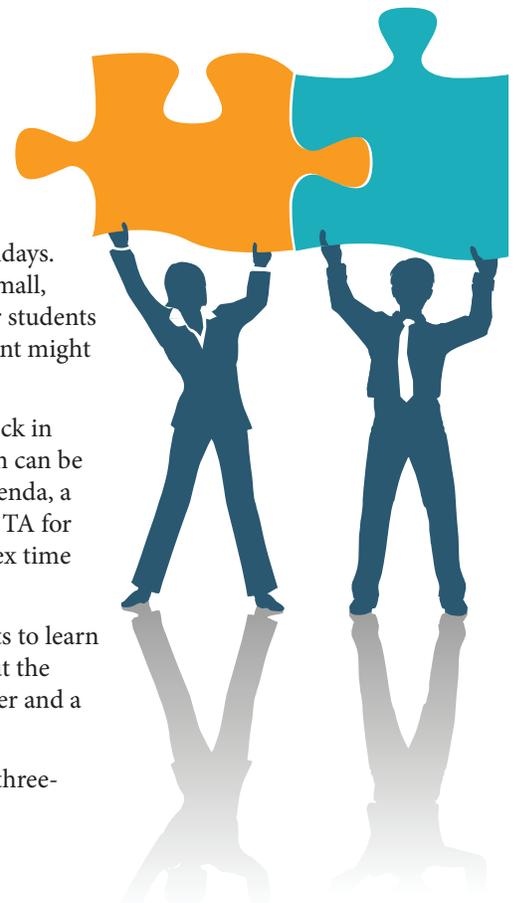
### How does the TA system support personalized learning and flex time?

Students stay in the classroom with the TAs for 40-minute sessions on Mondays and Fridays. They can pick one day for portfolio development, as explained below, and one day for small, quiet conversations with the group. At times older students in the group advise younger students about course selection, and help them with homework. For example, a Biology 30 student might help a Science 10 student.

At William E. Hay Composite school, flex time is part of the TA system, so students check in with their TA and put a plan in place for what they will do during flex time. Information can be logged and communicated through a message on a specific white board, a note in an agenda, a text message, an email, or some other pre-arranged method. Students check in with the TA for five minutes and then can move anywhere in the school for the next 30 minutes. This flex time occurs three times per week.

TA groups are also used for portfolio development. Portfolios are great tools for students to learn about themselves, advocate for themselves, and collect the best evidence they have about the work they are capable of doing. Portfolios include a resume, a career search, a cover letter and a list of post-secondary options.

Grade 12s present their portfolios to the TA group in rehearsal prior to presenting to a three-person panel. The rehearsal allows the Grades 9 to 11 to see and hear the presentation.



## How has the Teacher Advisor System changed over time?

At first, the groupings of students with the TAs were random. Then, after professional development gained by visiting New York's Coalition of Essential Schools and four other schools with TA programs, William E. Hay Composite chose to divide and group students based on their interests. Staff said, "Let's try this!" School staff list their own interests, and students complete a checklist of what they are interested in, and that's how students and teachers are linked today.

Originally, there were three weekly TA sessions and two flex time sessions per week, but over time the numbers flipped so that flex time was increased; this was at the request of students. Also, the school has a ZAP room, which runs each lunch hour for students to complete assignments, monitored by TAs.

## How success is measured

The *TELL Them FROM Me* survey is completed once per semester. The staff look at the data and make adjustments from the first to second semester, if warranted. "It's important for students to see the changes happening while they are in school. The survey allows staff to get a pulse of the school and look at changes," adds Baharally. "If students see nothing being changed, they will be bored with it, but if they see the changes, they are heartened."

A comment box is addressed every two weeks by one of the vice principals at the school. The vice principal speaks to the comments or is interviewed by the communications technology students who prepare an audio visual presentation in video format that can be viewed by students in their TA groups. In addition to answers to comment box questions, the video showcases activities around the school from sports to fine arts, skits to interviews.

A May 2013 survey reported that nine per cent of students (as opposed to 52 per cent five years ago) are neutral or strongly disagree that they have a significant relationship with a teacher in the school. Students have forged strong bonds with TAs. To commemorate that relationship, all grade 12s who are graduating meet with the TAs on the day prior to the graduation ceremony. On this day, students shake hands with their TAs and receive a card written to them by their TA. "To engage students as learners, you have to have that meaningful relationship," says Baharally.

For more on Teacher Advisor, contact:

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## What we learned

The TA system is fixed, but dynamic, and the school is willing to make changes to constantly improve upon the model. For instance, TAs have been given professional development sessions to develop their skills at facilitation of TA-parent meetings.

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