

# Balance in Our Day



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There just is not enough time in the school day. With the curriculum becoming more and more crowded, how can we protect our extended literacy and numeracy blocks? Morning routines such as opening exercises, checking student agendas and collecting notes and pizza money steal valuable minutes. Demands on our time continue to increase in the form of daily physical activity (DPA) and additional prep time. Factor in time spent at assemblies, a variety of special events, divisional meetings and mentoring, and the task of timetabling seems as daunting as climbing Mount Everest. One of the many challenges we face as administrators is to get the most out of each of the 300 minutes of instructional time we have available.

In response to this challenge, the staff at St. Gregory Catholic Elementary School implemented a balanced school day. This has been a very positive experience since its inception in September 2005. The benefits reaped by staff and students have been significant. This article will outline our implementation process and review the positive impact this change has had on the students, staff and parent community at St. Gregory School.

St. Gregory School hosts 280 students from junior kindergarten to Grade 8. As a rural school, it serves several small municipalities. All of our students are bussed. We have eleven regular classrooms including three portables. In addition to our eleven regular classroom teachers, we have 1.5 classroom resource teachers as well as a .4 special assignment teacher for literacy. We also have 1.7 FSL and prep teachers for a total complement of 14.6 teachers. We currently have six educational assistants and two paid lunchroom supervisors. As a principal, I enjoy full-time release.

## The Motivation to Change to a Balanced School Day

In 2004-05 I was assigned to a one-year term as System Principal working on curriculum initiatives at the board office. The senior administration team was undergoing a transition and part of my role was to help bridge that gap and maintain our system focus on assessment and literacy. One of my tasks was to review the experience of other jurisdictions as they implemented the balanced school day. Having time to research and explore these initiatives was a very rewarding experience.

| Balanced School Day Schedule |                             |         |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------|
| 8:30                         | Opening bell                |         |
| 8:35 - 10:15                 | First Instructional Period  | 100 min |
| 10:15 - 10:55                | First Nutrition Break       | 40 min  |
| 10:55 - 12:35                | Second Instructional Period | 100 min |
| 12:35 - 1:15                 | Second Nutrition Break      | 40 min  |
| 1:15 - 2:55                  | Third Instructional Period  | 100 min |
|                              | Dismissal                   |         |
| Available Instructional Time |                             | 300 min |
| Non-instructional time       |                             | 80 min  |

When I returned to St. Gregory School the following year, I was excited about the possibility of switching to a balanced school day. I presented the concept to my school leadership team who immediately saw the possibilities. When we considered how much time it takes to prepare primary students before and after outdoor recess breaks, the wheels started turning. During the winter months, these transitions represented many hours of lost instructional time.

Everyone agreed that time is precious and making the best possible use of each minute was a priority. It was with this in mind that we adopted our balanced school day.

Our balanced school day consists of three 100-minute instructional blocks and two 40-minute nutrition breaks. Students and staff still enjoy the same amount of non-instructional and instructional time as before. The main difference is that there are now only two inside/outside transitions rather than three. This allows for three larger instructional blocks instead of the traditional four shorter ones.

Ultimately, we hoped that a change to a balanced school day would help to enhance student learning and improve our literacy and numeracy scores. The larger instructional blocks made it easier to schedule required curriculum. It allowed for the recovery of lost time during transitions. This was especially apparent in the primary division where we estimated a saving of at least ten minutes per day. Over the course of a school year, that adds up to over 30 hours of instructional time.

In the traditional model, teachers often commented that the time between the last recess and dismissal was too short to provide an

optimal learning situation. Under the new system, one hundred minutes provides ample time for a lesson, even when you factor in time for dismissal routines. Our balanced day also provided more opportunities for planning, as well as formal and informal teacher meetings. This better distribution of non-instructional time is also more conducive to intramural activities.

We theorized that a balanced day model would lead to fewer discipline problems on the schoolyard, since the two shorter breaks would eliminate the longer noon-hour block in the traditional day. Shorter breaks meant less time for situations to develop.

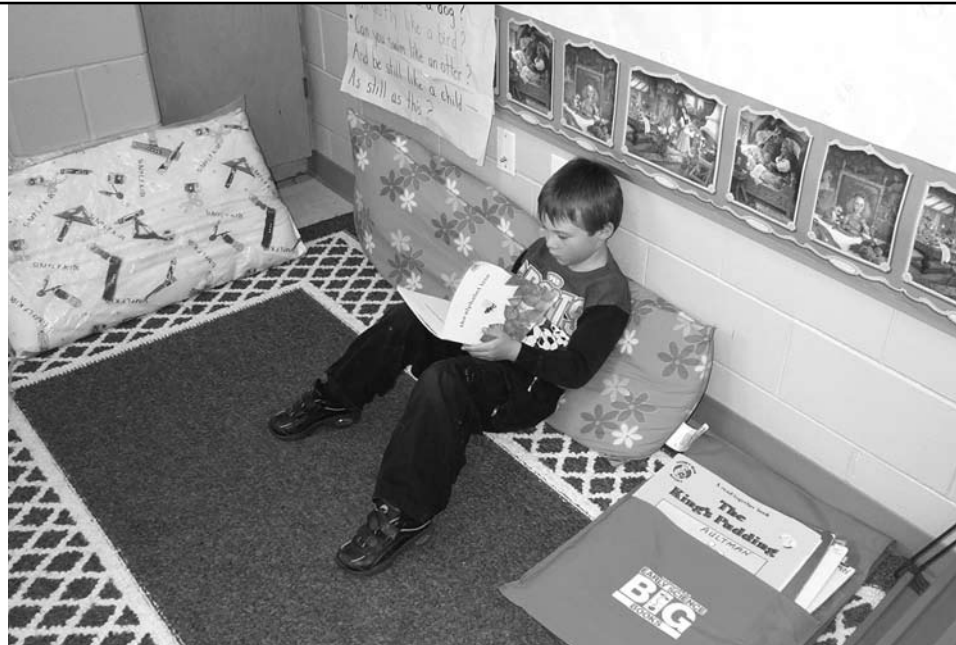
## Steps to Success

With any successful initiative, it is important to spend time establishing a vision and a belief in what we want to accomplish. We have to consider how the proposed change can best help us get to where we want to go. In the fall of 2004, our school leadership team, consisting of the classroom resource teacher, the special assignment teacher, the primary lead teacher and I, developed a strategy to implement a balanced school day for September 2005. My role from this point on was to maintain the focus, and to provide the time and support that the team needed to achieve our goal.

There were several challenges that had to be overcome during the implementation process. The first step was to present the concept to our school divisional leaders, then to all teaching staff for review and feedback. The primary team endorsed the concept from the onset, while the junior and intermediate teams were a little more reserved in their response.

We knew that the Ontario English Catholic Teachers' Association (OECTA) had some significant concerns with any change to the structure of the school day. We arranged a meeting in November with the local unit president to involve the union in the process. We felt that it would be easier to achieve our goal by inviting the union to voice its concerns ahead of time. Making the process as transparent as possible created an atmosphere of trust. OECTA was concerned that there would be an increase in supervision and teacher workload. The local president wanted to be involved in the development of an ongoing review process to address any staff issues. She also wanted to develop and conduct an independent staff survey to be completed by all teaching staff during the first year of implementation. The leadership team agreed to these provisions and the local OECTA president endorsed our implementation plan.

In January and February 2005, presentations were developed and made to the executive council, the education council (made up of trustees), as well as our Catholic School Advisory Council (CSAC). All were supportive and gave us the green light to pursue our strategy. Presentations made to the educational assistants, custodial staff, lunch supervisors and the school secretary were



well received. In June 2005 a letter was sent to all parents advising them of the change. The letter listed the benefits that a balanced school day would provide for their children.

The review committee consisted of the school superintendent of education, a teacher, the staff OECTA representative, the local OECTA president, the CSAC chair, a parent, a non-teaching staff representative and the principal. The task of this committee was to review and monitor the implementation process. In a pre-implementation survey developed by the review committee, the St. Gregory staff endorsed a one-year trial of the balanced day. The committee met twice prior to launching the new schedule in September 2005, and once a term during the 2005-06 school year.

Anticipated challenges identified by staff included:

- coaching parents on packing two nutritious lunches for their child;  
*The Health Unit endorsed the balanced day structure and was quick to provide material and resources for parents.*
- teacher-training to make effective use of 100-minute blocks;  
*This proved to be a non-issue in that the 100-minute blocks were well aligned with the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat initiatives.*



I have noticed that there are more informal and formal divisional meetings. Teachers do not mind using one of the two breaks to meet, resolve issues and share success stories. Teacher talk is more focussed on assessment and helping our target students. As anticipated, a statistical analysis of incident reports has shown an overall decrease in outdoor behaviour issues since the implementation of this structure.

The balanced school day has contributed in a positive way to the development of our professional learning teams and directly helped improve student success and teacher happiness at St. Gregory School.


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- adjustment to new eating times for staff;  
*This did take some getting used to at first. Some staff complained that they were gaining weight now that they actually had time to have lunch!*
- developing supervision schedules that fit with current collective agreements;  
*This presented a bit of a challenge but no teacher experienced an increase in supervision assignments over the regular school day structure.*
- sharing teachers with schools that were not on a balanced school day; and  
*This also presented some challenges but a collaborative effort addressed all issues.*
- accommodations for half-day in-service sessions.  
*Most half-day workshops are back to back; one in the morning and another in the afternoon. Teachers are prompt about returning to school so that another teacher can attend the afternoon session. When an in-service session is only for a half-day, our superintendent has allowed us to maintain a supply teacher for the whole day. This allows additional release time for teacher planning and prep.*

In the latter stages of the first year of implementation, the local OECTA president developed and conducted a confidential survey of all teaching staff. The following comments are drawn from that survey:

- less transition time lost, both inside and out;
- two longer nutrition breaks allows for more balanced distribution of food and two equal activity times; much healthier for students;
- more effective instructional time;
- less time lost, especially in the primary division, getting students in and out for recess;
- 100-minute blocks are great for centres, guided reading and numeracy activities;
- gym is open for two blocks for intramural activities;
- day seems to go faster and students get more work done;
- all in all, I love it;
- students are more focussed;
- day flies by;
- I work in two schools, one on balanced day and one on regular schedule. I prefer the balanced day. The longer teaching blocks are great;
- first time I have had actual usable prep time that was not eaten up by recess transitions; and
- fewer yard incidents due to less time outside.

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