

LEARNING BLOCKS

Using Time to Make a Difference

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*Where does the time go
... especially in schools?*

We often lament that we do not have enough time to cover the curriculum and to have the impact we want on student learning. Where does the time go and what can we do about it?



Time is a resource schools cannot afford to waste. According to Mike Schmoker, if time were “used wisely, it would be enough to promote unprecedented levels of success” (p. 90). Referring to the classroom observation study, *Learning 24/7*, he suggests that significant learning time is frequently eroded by non-instructional activities (p. 18).

One School’s Story

St. Gregory School in Powassan in the Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic DSB has taken some important steps to ensure that instructional time is kept focused on student learning and achievement. The school has implemented large blocks of uninterrupted time for literacy and numeracy at predictable time slots during the day. Principal Mike Courchesne says, “Staff can’t believe how quickly the day seems to go by. Learning blocks have contributed to a sense of calm learning and student success, which we celebrate!”

Over the past year, student achievement officers from the Secretariat shared resources and acted as critical friends during school visits and conversations. They partnered with staff to pose questions, to discuss issues, and to identify routines and procedures that promised to have a positive impact on learning and achievement.

Making a Commitment to Learning Blocks

According to an Ontario study, “the most effective school districts are demonstrating a commitment to uninterrupted time for learning (Campbell, Fullan & Glaze, 2006, p. 23). At St. Gregory,

the commitment to learning blocks is a key part of the school improvement plan. Large daily blocks of time are devoted to specific instruction and practice in literacy (100-120 minutes) and numeracy (60-75 minutes). Literacy and numeracy development is also embedded in activities throughout the day and integrated into all subject areas.

St. Gregory students know that their teachers are intent on protecting their learning time from distractions. Non-academic events such as announcements, transitions between activities and collecting money for field trips or pizza days are carefully controlled to minimize unwanted

impact on instructional time. By abandoning “the microphone fantasy - the belief that the person in a school holding the microphone holds the attention of students and teachers” (Reeves, 2006, p. 109), the school has found precious time for teaching and learning.

In collaboration with teachers, the principal ensures that learning blocks are given priority when planning schedules. Using a backward design planning model and considering a variety of factors such as gym availability and special education support, they develop and monitor routines and practices that support uninterrupted learning time as non-negotiable.

Schools should make every effort to convey the message that class time is sacred time and should be interrupted for important events only.

Marzano, 2003, p.31

Using Time in Learning Blocks

It is not enough to just schedule learning blocks, however. How time is used within the learning block is also key.

A variety of teaching/learning configurations, from explicit whole-class instruction, to small group work, to independent inquiry, supports the gradual release of responsibility (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 46). In the literacy learning block, St. Gregory teachers balance teacher-directed instruction with time for small group instruction. They carefully attune instruction to student needs and provide opportunities for individual scaffolding and practice. Learning blocks allow students to develop their literacy skills, explore topics thoroughly, engage in research and enquiry in all subject areas, and apply their learning in new contexts.

Similarly in mathematics, learning blocks provide the time necessary for students “to solve authentic problems, to reason mathematically and to reflect on new ideas” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 10). At St. Gregory School, numeracy lessons are structured on problem-solving and student sharing of solutions using assessment for learning strategies such as Bansho. Teachers often embed problem-solving in a three-part lesson format.

- 1. Before – Getting Started.** The purpose of the first part of the lesson is to prepare the students for learning and to activate their prior thinking and learning.
- 2. During – Working on It.** Students actively solve a problem that is just within reach either in collaboration with others or independently, using methods, solutions and resources of their choosing. While the students are engaged in finding a solution to the problem, the teacher circulates among them, assessing their interactions and mathematical thinking, and poses questions or asks for explanations from those who may be stuck or are in a position where further thinking would be beneficial.
- 3. After – Consolidation and Practice.** In this critical phase of the lesson, the teacher systematically facilitates and coordinates the pupils’ sharing of their solutions and thinking using assessment for learning strategies such as Bansho. Students explore similarities and differences in their thinking, make connections to prior knowledge and, with the teacher’s guidance, make generalizations. The teacher gives students the opportunity to practise their new learning and through observation and dialogue assesses individuals and the group. The teacher also uses this period to set a direction for future lessons or activities.

(Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, 2007, pp. 6-7)

Connecting to the Other Subjects

While teachers make explicit connections between the skills acquired during the learning blocks to the other subjects, they also make an effort to give pupils the opportunity to practise those skills in the other subject areas. When assessing student work and planning next steps, expectations are clustered with those from the other subjects. In language, for instance, non-fiction reading and procedural writing are important components of the science and social studies program.

The Results

In committing to the scheduling of large, uninterrupted learning blocks for literacy and numeracy, using a range of high-yield strategies within the learning blocks and capitalizing on cross-curricular connections, St Gregory has realized significant gains in reading, writing and mathematics during the past five years as shown by their EQAO scores.

Primary EQAO Results			
Year	Reading	Writing	Mathematics
2003 - 2004	47	40	73
2007 - 2008	74	93	96
Junior EQAO Results			
Year	Reading	Writing	Mathematics
2003 - 2004	45	34	47
2007 - 2008	86	83	86

The St. Gregory School team shares a sense of collective efficacy and moral purpose. To ensure that each student realizes a high level of success, the principal and his staff have pursued ongoing professional learning, fine-tuned their practices and purposefully designed routines and practices. At St. Gregory School, student learning occurs by design, not by accident.

Readers may wish to review the special issue on learning blocks published by the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat in 2007, *Learning Blocks for Literacy and Numeracy*, www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire. While supplies last, you may order a free copy from Service Ontario www.publications.serviceontario.ca.

St. Gregory School was invited to join the Schools on the Move initiative in 2009. Visit www.curriculum.org/LNS/schoolsonthemove for further information.

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