

Running Head: HIGH SCHOOL REDESIGN – FLEX TIME

High School Redesign – Flex Time

by

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Abstract

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This project is a proposal for the implementation of high school redesign initiatives at Salisbury Composite High School in Sherwood Park. This proposal includes a recommendation to adopt the flex block on a weekly basis at Salisbury Composite high school for a duration of forty minutes, and progress to offering course groupings and teacher advisory groups in the coming school year. This proposal was created in an effort to align the school goals with the mandate from Alberta Education (2010) to move towards an educational environment to support the 3 E's (Engaged student, Ethical citizen, Entrepreneurial Spirit).

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This paper examines the development, implementation and evaluation of a flexible schedule in high schools across Alberta. As a result of the High School Flexibility Enhancement Pilot Project (HSFEPP), an initiative from Alberta Education (2009), provincial high schools are currently exploring alternatives to the standard four by four block schedule (four classes, each block 85 minutes in length, two semesters per school year). My school, Salisbury Composite High School, (division of Elk Island Public Schools) is beginning the process of high school redesign, developing a flexible schedule to meet the individual needs' of our students. It is my intent (both within this project and in the larger role I occupy as teacher) to explore the rationale behind the new schedule, identify the goals of the program and critical components to a successful schedule. This paper will consist of four parts; (i) the background to high school redesign including my personal interest and experience with flexible scheduling, (ii) a literature review outlining the guiding principles for high school redesign and evaluation of various scheduling models; and; (iii) a recommendation based on the literature review outlining the design and implementation of a flexible schedule at my high school; and (iv) personal reflections on the entire learning process.

High School Flexibility Enhancement Pilot Project (HSFEPP)

The High School Flexibility Enhancement Pilot Project (HSFEPP) was an initiative from Alberta Education (2009) to “determine whether or not to maintain the requirement for students to have 25 hours of face-to-face instruction per high school course credit” (p. 6). The goal of this initiative was to explore various high school redesigns with the purpose of improving student learning and success in high school (Inspiring Education, 2010). The HSFEPP encouraged students to take ownership of their own learning by creating opportunities for students to make decisions that supported their learning needs and interests by removing time and space constraints. Within this

framework, flex time was available for students “to decide what they will learn, with whom they learn and where they will find support to learn” (Alberta Education, 2013, p. 4). The HSFEP was an initiative that empowered individual schools to “develop and implement high school redesigns that suit their schools’ unique contexts” (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 5).

This pilot project began in 2009 with 16 participating high schools, one from each school jurisdiction in Alberta. “Representative pilot schools were selected based on geographical location, socio-economic diversity, size of community, public and separate school designation, and performance on key indicators of the Accountability Pillar” (Alberta Education, 2009, p. 6). In October 2012, principals participating in the HSFEP unanimously supported the permanent removal of the 25 hour per credit requirement for their schools (Alberta Education, 2013). The HSFEP drew to a close in 2013 with many positive results (cf. appendix A) and as a result the pilot project was deemed a success.

For example, Alberta Education (2013) conducted a student survey entitled, “Tell Them From Me Survey” (p. 6), to measure intellectual engagement in participating schools. “Intellectual Engagement is a composite measure that includes student interest and motivation, their perception of rigour and relevance in their coursework, the effectiveness of learning time and the effort they are extending in their coursework” (p. 6). The Intellectual Engagement “measure is trending strongly upwards in 81% of the schools, and, as a group, schools participating in the HSFEP are outperforming both Canadian and Alberta norms” (Alberta Education, 2013, p. 6). In addition, high school completion rate has increased or stayed the same at 69% of the schools. Educators are still awaiting the approval from the Alberta government to permanently remove the 25-hour per credit requirement. However, in the current 2014-2015 school year, approximately 90 high schools across Alberta are moving forward with high school redesign (Alberta Education, 2013) to build on the success of the HSFEP and the vision from *Inspiring Education*.

Inspiring Education

In 2008, the Premier of Alberta, Ed Stelmach mandated an initiative called, *Inspiring Education*, “to create a long-term vision for education in Alberta”. (Inspiring Education, 2010, p. 5). This initiative began with a 22-member steering committee and developed into an extensive dialogue with thousands of Albertans, including teachers, school leaders, parents, students and community leaders who shared ideas to improve our education system in Alberta (Inspiring Education, 2010). The stakeholders involved in this initiative concluded that the world is constantly changing and jobs in the future depend on technology and innovation. The future of education in Alberta needs to evolve beyond the work in a textbook towards a more individual and student-centred environment.

As a result, “Albertans articulated their vision for education through specific outcomes which have been summarized as “the Three E’s” of education for the 21st century. Albertans told us the Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) system should strive to instil the following qualities and abilities in our youth; Engaged Thinker, Ethical Citizen, and Entrepreneurial Spirit (Inspiring Education, 2010, p. 5).

The 3 E’s. In support of the vision of the 3 E’s, as articulated by *Inspiring Education*, Jeff Johnson, the Education Minister in Alberta, signed a Ministerial Order on May 6, 2013 “to establish a clear mandate for Alberta Education and school authorities to follow when developing provincial curriculum” (New Ministerial Order, 2013, para. 2). The Ministerial Order (2013) states

the fundamental goal of education in Alberta is to inspire all students to achieve success and fulfillment, and reach their full potential by developing competencies of Engaged Thinkers and Ethical Citizens with an Entrepreneurial Spirit, who contribute to a strong and prosperous economy and society (p. 1).

The following is a description of the 3 E’s mandated by the Minister of Education in Alberta;

- The Engaged Thinker - thinks critically, uses technology to learn, is able to communicate effectively, and adapts to change with a positive attitude and hope for the future.
 - The Ethical Citizen - builds relationships based on fairness, respect, empathy and compassion; and who through teamwork, collaboration and communication contributes fully to the community and the world.
 - The Entrepreneurial Spirit - achieves goals through hard work and strives for excellence; who is competitive, adaptable and resilient; and who has the confidence to take risks
- (Inspiring Education, 2010, p. 5-6)

The vision from *Inspiring Education* and mandated by the Minister of Education is to develop core competencies in students, summarized by the 3 E's. As educators, it will be our job to support the students' development of higher meta-cognitive functions through contextual problem solving learning opportunities and allow students to progress at their own rate and pursue their own interests.

Policy Shifts. Inspiring Education (2010) identified four policy shifts to help achieve the vision of the 3 E's. First, educators should focus more on education and less on the school. "Our concept of education should expand beyond the school and integrate the community, the environment and the "real world" (p. 23). A flexible schedule (FLEX) would allow students to explore education beyond the classroom walls and into the community to learn from real world experience.

Second, more decisions should be based on the learner as opposed to the system. In the past, teachers were required to teach a set amount of content in a set amount of time. However, moving forward "learners should be supported as individuals with learning opportunities to support their unique needs and interests (p. 25). Flex time gives students the ability to spend additional time to accomplish a task or to focus on areas of interest. Many schools across Alberta have already

implemented a flex block (e.g., 45 – 60 minutes per day) for students to receive remedial help or attend a special interest class.

Third, educators should focus more on building competencies and less on content. “There will be less emphasis on knowing something, and more emphasis on knowing how to access information about it” (p. 25). Students need to develop critical thinking, problem solving and innovation and creativity skills (Inspiring Education, 2010). “The current required hours of study for each subject area might not be applicable” (p. 26). A flexible schedule would permit students to demonstrate competencies in personal areas of interest.

Fourth, technology should be used to support the creation and sharing of knowledge and less to support teaching. “Ultimately, the power of technology should be harnessed to support innovation and discovery, not simply to aid teaching” (p. 29). The flexible schedule creates opportunities for students to explore and learn on their own or with peers. The flex block would provide time for students to use technology to aid in their learning.

These four policy shifts and a discussion of the 3 E’s, Engaged thinkers, Engaged citizens and Entrepreneurial spirits leaves educators with a vision for the future. The next task is to redesign our high schools and consider the relevance of our curriculum to address the vision articulated by the thousands of Albertans who participated in the work of *Inspiring Education*.

Ideological Change

Progressive Ideology. The FLEX framework is designed around the progressivist ideology. According to Eisner (1995), a progressive ideology creates, “educational situations through which a child becomes increasingly able to deal with ever more complex and demanding problems” (p. 68). FLEX provides students with the opportunity to make their own decisions on how to utilize their time. Students must take responsibility for their own learning. This process enables students to see the connection between the decisions they make and the consequences of their decisions. The ability

to make responsible, mature decisions comes with practice. Students will be better prepared in life after high school if given these opportunities to make their own choices.

Personal Ideology. When I reflect on the purpose of the curriculum, I consider my pedagogical stance and ideology. Eisner (1995) describes a Rational Humanist to be an ideology which emphasises memorization and a teaching process that delivers information and tests according to recall, not developing rational powers. Before this program, I thought the role of a teacher was to share knowledge of a subject with students. After researching the trend towards competency based learning, I began to appreciate the need to provide learning environments for my students to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills in addition to other core competencies.

To develop these core competencies that are outlined by Alberta Education, we need to acknowledge the role of the curriculum. The word curriculum is more than knowledge and skills surrounding subject matter. Schwab (1973) explains curriculum as, “elements in a maturation process by which values are realized reflexively” (p. 507). To me, the curriculum addresses competencies, attitudes and values that the community deems appropriate, in our case, the 3 E’s: Engaged thinkers, Ethical citizens with an Entrepreneurial spirit and provides support for students to grow from the curriculum.

Personal Implications

The policy shift towards developing core competencies, (as stated in the 3 E’s) through the use of the curriculum will require a new approach to teaching. As a math teacher, teaching the mathematical concepts in a drill and practice format will be less important than teaching students how to apply their knowledge to conceptual problems. For example, a student may be able to demonstrate a procedural question after observing the process. However, teaching to develop core competencies requires a process that gives students the opportunity to think critically. This would involve using the knowledge base from mathematics and applying it to a real-world scenario. This

change in pedagogy will not be easy for me or my peers. It will require time and support to shift my way of thinking. The implementation of flex time is meant to help me with this process.

Time for collaboration with peers should be built into the schedule for teachers to share ideas about how to develop students' core competencies. The collaborative process may even lead to some cross-curricular activities during flex time. For example, while studying different graphs in mathematics like sinusoidal waves, a project between math and science could be created for students to make the connection. Flex time may provide opportunities for collaboration and cross-curricular projects if my school deems these activities to be an important component of FLEX.

I anticipate my relationship with students will also change with the implementation of FLEX. During flex time I will offer remedial support to students who require extra attention and at other times provide enrichment activities, or cross-curricular projects to those who are interested. In addition to supporting students in the subject of mathematics, I may have to take on the role of teacher advisor to mentor and guide students through the FLEX process to ensure they are making responsible decisions to support their own learning. The teacher advisory program gives students a connection to an adult within the school and a feeling of support. The role of teacher advisor is to "promote students' educational, personal, and social development" (Zeigler, 1993, p. 1).

Teacher Advisory Role

With the flexibility of time and space, students will have the opportunity to decide where to learn, what to learn and when to learn it. The ability to make good decisions may not come naturally to students, it is a learned behaviour. According to the Toronto Board of Education (1993), teachers will need to provide mentorship and guidance to assist the students' development into a self-directed learner. The ability for teachers to individualize programs based on student needs will depend on how motivated the teacher is as well as how well the teacher knows the student. Teachers will need to form strong relationships with students to understand the students' individual needs, how they

learn effectively and what support is necessary for their success. My role as a teacher may extend beyond teaching mathematics and into the role of a mentor for students in my teacher advisory group with the implementation of flex time at my school.

Background of this Study

Inspiring Education (2010) clearly outlines a vision for the future of education in Alberta. The development of the 3E's; Engaged student, Ethical citizen and Entrepreneurial spirit provides direction for educators. However, *Inspiring Education* (2010) "sets high-level direction, but it does not lay out the process for implementation" (p. 6). Further, "it is intended to guide, inform and encourage decision makers" (p. 15). With only a vision and no prescriptive path to implement change, schools are required to consider their personal contexts and environments to develop and implement a high school redesign.

The four year project, HSEPP (2009-2013) is now complete and principals agreed unanimously to remove the 25-hour per credit requirement (Alberta Education, 2013). As a result, approximately 90 schools across Alberta are currently in the process of high school redesign. These FLEX initiatives are developed, implemented and evaluated at the school level. I am excited for my school to participate in high school redesign efforts, however, based on experience I am sceptical that the intended outcome of increasing student learning may not be achieved.

Personal Educational Context

As a mathematics teacher at a high school in Alberta, I am interested in participating in the high school redesign process. In my experience, students do learn at different rates and it is optimal to give students the opportunity to work at their own pace. Some students are driven and can excel with self-directed learning opportunities whereas other students need to be guided through the process. With the removal of the 25-hour per credit requirement, schools have the ability to implement a flex block, combine course offerings, or allow students to complete course requirements

at their own pace. Given the range of individual needs, I support a flexible learning environment where I can give each student the support they need to be successful in the course.

The self-directed learning approach may help students develop the 3 E's. Students must be able to seek solutions to problems posed through critical thinking and perhaps the use of technology (engaged thinker). Students may also achieve greater success when they collaborate with peers on their homework and projects (ethical citizen). In addition, self-directed learning provides the opportunity for students to work hard and strive for excellence (entrepreneurial spirit). In theory, self-directed learning seems to be the way to achieve the vision from Alberta Education. However, in my experience, logistically, it becomes very difficult to manage this process.

In the next section, case studies will be used to illustrate the lived experience of self-directed learning. Case Study 1 involves my personal experience as a teacher in a self-directed non-academic math course. This study identifies increased student motivation to complete the course, but highlights the students lack of motivation to achieve mastery learning. Case Study 2 will describe another teachers' experience with self-directed learning in a combined Career and Life Management (CALM) and Physical Education course. This study identifies the lack of mastery with the removal of the 25 hour per credit requirement.

Self - Directed Learning

Case Study 1. One year while teaching a Math 10-3 course (non-academic class); I turned to self-directed learning for students. My motivation was to allow students to work at their own pace so they were able to master a concept before continuing on, and it was a mechanism to improve attendance and behaviour. I discovered through discussions with my students' that attendance issues and refusal to complete assignments arose from boredom (the coursework was too easy for them). Students were given the opportunity to write the chapter test when they demonstrated an understanding of each outcome. When students met all of the course requirements, they were no

longer obligated to attend class. Unfortunately, this system of self-directed learning was not effective in achieving excellence from my students'. I quickly discovered the students were not motivated to learn, they were simply motivated to complete the course and be exempt from attending class. Unfortunately the students were satisfied with a pass in the course.

When considering a flexible learning environment in the future, I am fearful that the removal of the 25-hour per credit requirement will create an atmosphere of mediocrity. Upon reflection, I feel that self-directed learning was not successful for non-academic students. However, the results may be different with an academic class, where students were in pursuit of achieving excellence.

Case Study 2. An example of the FLEX programs and how they have been applied in Alberta is via M.E. Lazerte High School in Edmonton. In addition to offering a flex block, the program requirements for physical education and Career and Life Management (CALM) were combined. Students were required to use their flex time to complete projects from CALM and were not allowed to participate in physical education classes until projects were completed (this within itself is problematic since the wellness initiative in Alberta is considering ways to increase physical activity, not decrease it). According to one of the teachers (Dunkley, personal communication, July 23, 2013), the quality of assignments were poor and the students were looking for proficiency, not excellence when completing the CALM assignments. This example strengthens my concern of student motivation when completing self-directed courses.

I conclude from my personal experiences that some students lack motivation to learn and excel in subject matter that is not interesting to them. This is an important consideration when moving forward with high school redesign. I do not believe that self-directed learning should become a staple of FLEX initiatives. It may be effective for some students in some subjects, however, not the school population as a whole. The solution may be to simply give students the

opportunity to learn what they want during a flex block to empower them to be responsible for their own learning and develop the 3 E's.

Moving forward with FLEX, I recognize the need to research other educator's experiences to discover the critical components necessary for a successful FLEX initiative. As high schools across Alberta explore a variety of redesign efforts, it will be necessary to communicate with one another to identify what components have improved student learning.

Significance of Study

My school is currently in the information gathering stage of high school redesign and considering the implementation of a flex block. During a professional development day, a committee of approximately 20 teachers and administrators worked together to understand the rationale behind high school redesign, examined case studies, and discussed the advantages and limitations of each flexible schedule under review. The intent of this committee (which I hope will meet again) is to address these three questions;

1. What is the goal of FLEX?
2. What schedule and components of FLEX would maximize student and staff learning?
3. How do we effectively implement a flex block?

The literature review in chapter 2 will help to address these questions. As a support resource to assist schools with the redesign, Alberta Education released a document entitled, "High School Flexibility Enhancement: A Literature Review" (2009). This document provides an overview of foundational principles acquired from the literature on high school redesign in North America. In my literature review, I will discuss these guiding foundational principles (mastery learning, rigorous and relevant curriculum, personalization, flexible learning environments, educator roles and professional development, meaningful relationships, and home and community involvement) and provide links between these principles, the vision from Alberta Education, and various flex models.

The intent of this paper is to address the question, “*how does a high school implement flexible scheduling to improve student learning?*” Based on the literature review in chapter 2 and evaluation of case studies, both current and from the past, I will present recommendations for the implementation of a flexible schedule for my school in chapter 3.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter will explore the literature supporting the move towards high school redesign in Alberta. The question, *how do schools effectively implement flexible scheduling to improve student learning*, will be addressed through an analysis of research and case studies.

Chapter 1 discussed the work completed by Inspiring Education (2010) to create a vision for the future of education in Alberta (developing the 3 E's in students; Engaged students, Ethical citizens with an Entrepreneurial spirit), which resulted in the HSFEP. This initiative was “fundamentally a study about the influence that the Carnegie Unit (requirement of 25-hours per credit of face-to-face instruction) has had on the culture of teaching and learning in Alberta high schools” (p. 3). The success of this initiative has inspired approximately 90 high schools across Alberta to consider their own high school redesign initiatives to improve student learning within their own contexts (Alberta Education, 2010).

In this chapter, a literature review will examine the results from researchers focused on high school redesign efforts. First, flexible scheduling will be defined. Second, a review of historical practices will be evaluated to identify the weaknesses of the model that ultimately led to failure within ten years of its introduction (Zepeda & Meyers, 2006). Third, the seven foundational principles guiding high school redesign; mastery learning, rigorous relevant curriculum, personalization, flexible learning environments, educators roles and professional development, meaningful relationships and home and community involvement will be defined and linked to flexible scheduling models for 21st century learners (Alberta Education, 2009). Finally, this chapter will conclude with an analysis of current flex initiatives and review the critical components of high school redesign to include; flexible schedules, student accountability, teacher advisory groups, course groupings, and credit recovery options.

Definition of Flexible Scheduling

Flexible scheduling, what does it mean? On the surface, combining the words flexible and schedule seem contradictory. The definition of *flexible* implies variability and fluidity whereas the word *schedule* implies uniformity, regularity and stability (Manlove & Beggs, 1965). However, when we combine these terms we get flexible scheduling – a system that has fluidity and variability with a predictable, regular routine. The flexible schedule may call for classes of varying length, with varying numbers of students. In addition, some time within the day may be scheduled for independent choice where students may choose where to spend their time based on both interest and need (Alberta Education, 2013).

In Alberta, this flexible scheduling option is being realized as more than a timetable change. The HSFEP demonstrated that the removal of the 25-hours per credit requirement shifted the focus from teacher-centered lessons to being student-and outcome-centred. Flex time is being considered as a key component of high school redesign. During this time “students are not sent to any specific teacher for any specific course but instead students have the choice of what, where and with whom they will learn” (Alberta Education, 2011, p. 15). Flex time is a structural shift that has led to a culture of student-centeredness, where the students’ individual needs are considered first and then the role of the teacher responds according to the identified needs to support learning. The introduction of the flex block is resulting in students taking control of their learning and working to achieve their goals (Alberta Education, 2011).

In addition, the work of teachers becomes more collaborative and focused on finding ways to ensure the individual needs of students are being met (Alberta Education, 2013). Some schools have built in time for professional development and collaboration within the schedule for teachers to work together for planning and development (Alberta Education, 2011). Team teaching approaches have also been utilized for the teachers to provide cross-curricular activities or experiment with different

size groupings to address varying student needs. This type of schedule accommodates individual needs, generates more active learning situations and opportunities for supplementary learning.

Although Alberta Education (2011) claims the flexible schedule provides more time for teacher collaboration, team teaching opportunities, and cross-curricular activities, schools must consciously plan for these changes to occur. History has demonstrated the flexible schedule does not automatically guarantee cultural and pedagogical changes, it merely guarantees a structural shift in the timetable.

History Lessons. The flexible schedule was introduced a half a century ago in an attempt to personalize the learning environment (Backen, 1971). Students were required to attend some scheduled classes; however, almost half of the day was unstructured for self-learning opportunities (Trump, 1973). According to Zepeda and Mayers (2006) the flexible modular schedule was abandoned by the late 1960's for several reasons, including problems with student discipline. In part, this was due to the fact that 30-40% of the day was allocated for unscheduled student time to get extra help from teachers or to work independently. Unfortunately both students and teachers had difficulties managing this time (Backen, 1971). Many schools returned to a traditional school model after the flexible scheduling program was deemed a failure.

Historical research describing flexible scheduling models has primarily focused on the timetable (Backen; 1971; Cunningham; 1973; Trump 1963). The failure of previous models may be due to the fact that the structural change of the schedule was not supported with cultural and pedagogical changes. Currently in Alberta, the move toward flex initiatives has been supported through the cultural shifts in schools. According to Alberta Education (2011) "schools begin with considering the individual needs of each student first and then casting the teacher in the role of a responsive, caring adult who is there to support learning" (p. 4). This cultural shift was not apparent in historical flexible scheduling practices.

The lack of cultural shift and pedagogical change may have been due to the teachers' lack of training or motivation. Fullen (2000) states:

What these models missed was the complex process by which local curricular decisions get made, the entrenched and institutionalized political and commercial relationships that support existing textbook driven curricula, the weak incentives operating on teachers to change their practices in their daily work routines, and the extraordinary costs of making large-scale, long-standing changes of a fundamental kind in how knowledge is constructed in classrooms.

(p. 15)

In recognition of this barrier towards change, the process of altering the curriculum focus has begun through the work of *Inspiring Education* (2010). *Inspiring Education* (2010) states that to achieve the vision of educated Albertans in 2030, we need policy shifts that focus more on education, centred on the learner, building competencies and using technology to support the creation and sharing of knowledge. As such, there is now less focus on the school, less focus on the content, less centred on the system and technology to support teaching. This shift in policy is allowing teachers to explore the role of the school and their role as educators.

It is clear that flexible scheduling failed in the 1960's. One would naturally question why the concept would be reintroduced in the 21st century. The answer; educators are still looking for a process to personalize learning for the individual student. Schools are now required to teach students how to learn, not just absorb content knowledge. The process of learning is changing and therefore the education model must change as well. To help with the process of change, seven foundational principles of high school redesign have been articulated by Alberta Education (2013) as guidelines for stakeholders to consider when developing and implementing flex initiatives.

Seven Principles

Alberta Education (2009) completed a literature review from organizations and researchers across North America regarding high school redesign initiatives. From this research, several key foundational principles arose as common themes across researchers. Alberta Education (2009) concluded that several organizations are focusing their efforts around seven underlying themes;

- Mastery learning – students are required to demonstrate understanding of curriculum through performance-based evaluations.
- Rigorous and relevant curriculum – students are required to complete challenging and engaging curricula that is relevant to real-world tasks
- Personalization – unique needs of every individual student is met
- Flexible learning environments – provides students with a variety of learning options in terms of scheduling, pacing and delivery methods
- Educator roles and professional development – teachers and administrators are supported through professional learning communities
- Meaningful relationships – strong teacher – student relationships are created to support learning and the learning environment
- Home and community involvement – student learning environments are extended and supported outside the school

The intent of these guiding principles is intended as information and guidance for stakeholders during the school redesign process. For example, Louis St. Laurent High School, in Edmonton, identifies one or two themes to address each year. Personalization and flexible learning environments are the focus this school year (Bustemante, personal communications, Nov 22, 2014). As a result, flex time is being utilized to support each student with their individual needs through tutorials, remedial support and enrichment activities.

Change is a process that takes careful planning and time. Therefore, each school should prioritize the themes of high school redesign to guide the development and implementation of a flex model according to the schools needs. In this section, each theme will be defined and linked to a component of the flex model.

Mastery Learning. The term mastery learning arose from the work of Benjamin S. Bloom (1971), who considered how to individualize instruction to improve student learning. Bloom suggested that all students could reach a high level of achievement if teachers could provide the necessary time and learning conditions for the individual. He outlined a strategy to support student learning with corrective procedures during the learning process, which we know term, formative assessment. This form of assessment identifies the students' strengths and areas that require improvement. The student is given support and guidance to master the desired outcomes. Bloom suggests with repeated formative assessments, students are able to work toward mastery and are therefore motivated when second chances are given (Bloom, as cited in Guskey, 2010).

According to Alberta Education (2009), mastery learning is an important theme of high school redesign. The flex block will provide extra time for students to complete formative assessments at an individual pace. In addition, students may use this time to exhibit mastery of an outcome (by re-writing a test or completing an assignment). The flex block will provide students with the support needed to achieve mastery learning because teachers will have the time to work with individual students who need support in a particular area. In addition, students who have not successfully completed the requirements of a course at the end of a semester may be given the opportunity for credit recovery (achieving credit for a course once standards have been met) during flex time.

Rigorous and Relevant Curriculum. According to Ainsworth (2010), “a rigorous curriculum is an inclusive set of intentionally aligned components—clear learning outcomes with

matching assessments, engaging learning experiences, and instructional strategies—organized into sequenced units of study” (p. 4). A rigorous and relevant curriculum requires mastery learning to occur within a personalized learning environment. Students should be asked to do work that is relevant to their own personal context at school (Darling-Hammond, 2006). The jobs of the future require innovation as opposed to rote memory and procedural jobs from the past.

Eisner (1998) believes that decisions made in regards to the curriculum within the school, centre around the values that are in place. The trend towards flexible programming supports individuality and encourages students to become responsible for their learning (entrepreneurial spirit). As an educator in Alberta, it is important to use the curriculum to develop the 3 E’s in students as mandated by Alberta Education (2010). Educators need to focus less on the school and content and more on education and centered on the learner (Inspiring Education, 2010). These policy shifts require educators to consider alternative school models to align with these goals.

Flex time gives students the opportunity to take control. Students are able to decide what to learn, where to learn and with whom (Alberta Education, 2010). Flex time supports a student-centred approach to education whereby decisions are made based on the interests and needs of the individual. In addition, the collaborative space provided for students within a school, demonstrates the belief that working together is important (ethical citizen). This system of learning helps students to develop competencies within the curriculum such as time management, responsibility and collaboration (aspects of the 3 E’s).

Personalization. Personalization is a process of adjusting presentation of information to learners based on individual needs, interest and readiness, rather than expecting students to modify themselves for the curriculum (Hall, 2002). According to the Government of Alberta (2010), “personalized learning involves the provision of high-quality and engaging learning opportunities that meet students’ diverse learning needs, through flexible timing and pacing, in a range of learning

environments with learning supports and services tailored to meet their needs” (p. 14). This process of personalization within schools may be supported through the use of teacher advisory groups. Teachers may work with students to develop an individualized learning plan during flex time.

The flex block may provide students with time to work in small-group settings or meet with the teacher on an individual basis. Flex time may also provide opportunities for a student to complete a cross-curricular project which provides a stronger connection to the curriculum as opposed to learning by single subject groupings. According to Backen (1971), flexible scheduling will only be effective if each student receives the right amount of teacher instruction and time on each course according to their needs. The primary purpose of flex is “to individualize and personalize learning for the students” (Backen, 1971, p. 363).

Educator Roles and Professional Development. Corley (1997) concluded that teacher readiness was a factor in implementing a schedule change. Teachers needed to support the change and be prepared to do the work necessary for the change to be successful. Without this support and acceptance, a schedule change would merely be structural change to the timetable without achieving any of the benefits it was outlined to accomplish.

According to Cunningham (1973), this change in scheduling and pedagogy of teaching requires staff to be mature, self-confident, enthusiastic, able to manage procedures including knowledge of material, meaningful organization practices, clearly defined instructions and reasonable performance expectations. Above all else, the staff needs to be prepared and willing to work hard. Change is not an easy process.

Alberta Education (2010) wants teachers to become facilitators of learning opposed to deliverers of content knowledge. Teachers are being asked to reduce the amount of direct instruction and create a more student-centred approach. For this change in pedagogy to occur, there must be adequate professional development opportunities to help educators through the process (Zepeda &

Mayers, 2006). I expect that providing collaboration time with professional learning communities will help educators receive the support they need to work through the process of developing, implementing and evaluating the flexible schedule to create a more student-centred approach to learning.

Meaningful Relationships. Another component of high school redesign is to develop meaningful relationships between teachers and students. Teachers are better equipped to personalize the learning environment when they have a strong relationship with their students. The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) state that successful high schools provide “meaningful relationships with instructors who are qualified to help students achieve high standards” (NCSL, 2005 as cited in Alberta Education, 2009, p. 14). Further, meaningful relationships are “established with excellent teachers and principals, through continuous interaction between students and adults and by ensuring no high school students are anonymous” (p. 14). High schools throughout Alberta recognize the value of a strong bond between teachers and students and as a result teacher advisory groups (TAG) have been implemented to help create these relationships. The concept of TAG will be discussed later in this chapter as a component of the flex model.

Conclusion. The themes from high school redesign initiatives must be considered when developing a flex model.

- Mastery learning requires flexibility of the learning environment for students’ to advance at their own pace. Both flex time and credit recovery options may be requirements for mastery learning to occur.
- Rigorous and relevant curriculum may be addressed through cross-curricular projects. However, teachers would need to have collaboration time to develop these projects and time for team teaching may be needed.

- Personalization and flexible learning environments require that individual needs are recognized and the teacher who is able to help the student is able and willing during flex time. In addition, flexible learning environments may include course groupings where pacing may be adjusted for varying course requirements.
- Meaningful relationships may be intentionally created through the use of teacher advisory groups. The teacher-student relationships are required for personalization to occur.
- Professional development may be facilitated through dedicated flex time. Staff may use this time to collaborate through professional learning communities.

These guiding principles may be addressed through the effective implementation of flex. The next section will outline components of a flex model to consider when developing and implementing high school redesign efforts.

Flex Models

Alberta Education (2013) outlined seven foundational guiding principles as a resource to stakeholders involved with high school redesign. However, each school is responsible for the development and implementation of a flex model to suit the schools' unique contexts. According to Williamson (2008) "the best schedules are developed based on data about student performance, student learning needs, and curricular and instructional requirements" (para. 3). The schedule can provide students with extended time for more in-depth or hands-on activities, opportunity for additional academic support or time to participate extra-curricular activities such as school clubs, intramurals and fine art productions. Teachers may value the flexibility to adjust the time allotted for individual subjects and individual students. Collaboration with peers may also be an important goal for the school.

Before implementing a schedule change, it is necessary to set goals for both the students and teachers in order to address the needs of the school community. In my experience, the identification of goals for the school will lead to a decision about how to organize time, space and numbers for individual classes, students and staff.

The implementation of a flexible schedule requires careful consideration of the program goals which is to develop the 3 E's in students through the seven foundational principles of high school redesign (mastery learning, rigorous and relevant curriculum, personalization, flexible learning environments, educator roles and professional development, meaningful relationship and home and community involvement). These underlying themes must be considered when deciding how to redesign a high school. Each school should consider the following;

1. Flex time – frequency and duration of flex time for student choice
2. Accountability – debate as to whether or not students should be held accountable for their time during flex (whether or not to take attendance)
3. Teacher advisory groups – determine student to teacher ratio, time and duration of TAG meetings and role of teacher
4. Course groupings – with the elimination of the 25-hour per credit requirement, determine which courses if any could be combined to maximize use of time
5. Credit recovery – complete course requirements from previous semester courses to obtain credit without repeating the course

Flex Time. The implementation of flex time in Alberta gives students the freedom to select where and what they want to learn and with whom (Alberta Education, 2010). Students are in control of making decisions to support their learning needs and interests. Students may choose to attend a variety of course offerings (tutorials, special interest classes, physical activity) or may opt for independent study time in a quiet area to study or complete group projects. Participating schools

report the most effective way “to nurture a sense of student ownership in learning is to provide an opportunity for students to exercise choice and learn to advocate for their learning” (Alberta Education, 2013, p. 1).

Historical scheduling models should be considered before deciding on the structural time change to high schools in Alberta. Trump (1963) discussed a variety of flexible scheduling models to include;

- two hour blocks of time for two different subjects (teachers could organize the time based on large group instruction, small group and individual time).
- 15 minute time slots (for example, 60 minutes for math, 60 minutes for science, 30 minutes for music, 45 minutes for Spanish).
- scheduled various amounts of time for large group, small group, and individual instruction (p. 368).

The concept of block time for two different subjects supports the movement by Alberta Education (2009) to remove the 25-hour per credit requirement per credit and utilize time according to program needs. In addition, through larger blocks of time, team teaching may bring coherence to student learning experiences. According to Alberta Education (2011) teams of teachers at various high schools are exploring synergies between their outcomes. Some staffs “deconstruct Programs of Study and reconstruct them in ways that are more meaningful for students” (p. 17). The large blocks of time create the opportunity for teachers to collaborate to create both cross-curricular projects for students and give teachers the ability to adjust instructional time for each subject based on need. However, for this model to be successful, teachers need to be able to work well together and have consistent student goals and priorities (Alberta Education, 2011). This type of schedule requires a major pedagogical change which would be difficult to achieve without full staff support. Many schools in Alberta are currently in the first year or two of high school redesign. As such, their

schedule has not received a major transformation, rather, a range of flex block options have been introduced in the initial phase.

Currently, schools throughout Alberta have implemented a range of flex time as a component of high school redesign. In discussion with colleagues, the typical amount of flex time is between 40-60 minutes ranging from one to five days per week. Based on a 1600 minute week, flex time equates to anywhere from approximately 3% - 19% of school time.

Each of the 90 Alberta high schools currently participating in high school redesign may be at a different stage in the process and therefore different amounts of time are dedicated to flex. For example, Mother Margaret Mary School in Edmonton has been running a flex block for the last few years and are operating flex daily for an hour (Cleave, personal communication, Nov 22, 2014) whereas Salisbury Composite High School in Sherwood Park is starting with one flex block per week that is forty minutes in duration to introduce the concept to the school community (Allen, personal communication, Nov 28, 2014).

In discussion with teachers and administrators at Salisbury Composite High School, core teachers (English, Social, Science & Mathematics) supported the move towards a flex block and were not concerned with fewer instructional minutes per block. However, the teachers involved in Career and Technology (CTS) programs and Fine Arts were very concerned with instructional blocks being reduced to less than 80 minutes. One teacher indicated that classes requiring set-up time in CTS would have a difficult time offering an effective program with a class length less than 80 minutes in duration. After discussing a variety of viewpoints, the staff attending the PD flex session decided upon a 40 minute flex block once per week. It was the belief from the majority of the staff that students will be able to take advantage of the benefits of the flex block without it adversely affecting their regular course offerings.

There are a number of scheduling models to be considered in high schools across Alberta. The flex block is a dedicated amount of time for students to select what they want to learn during that time. Each school has a different model for the implementation of a flex block. For example;

- J. Percy Page in Edmonton offers a flex block every morning for an hour and late entry on Friday. The staff use the Friday morning block for collaboration time (Cumberland, personal communication, Dec 6, 20014).
- M.E. Lazerte High School offers the flex block once per week in the morning (Parish, personal communication, Dec 5, 2014).
- Mother Margaret Mary offers a flex block on a rotating schedule every day to attach the block to alternating periods. In addition, one flex block utilized for teacher advisory group sessions.

A second option for flex time is to offer flex days. Jasper Place High School in Edmonton offers five flex days per semester for a total of ten per school year. (Kozakavich, personal communication, Dec 6, 2014). During this flex day students are able to participate in a variety of sessions and teachers have time for collaboration.

According to Fijal (2011) some schools participating in the HSFEPF implemented early exit options in select classes. Students who were able to progress through outcomes at an accelerated pace were able to write the course exam early and focus on other areas to keep them engaged and interested. For example, Bellerose Composite High School allowed English 20-2 students the opportunity to work at an accelerated pace and write the final exam in May (HSFEPP Year-End Report, 2011).

Table 1 has been created as a summary of comments obtained through personal conversations with colleagues throughout Edmonton who are currently practicing these various schedules.

Table 1

Flexible Scheduling Models

Schedule	Description	Advantages	Disadvantages
Flex block	Block of time - once per day or week for forty five minutes to one hour. The flex block may be at the beginning of the day, end of the day or on a rotating schedule.	Extra work for teachers is minimal. Many use time for remedial help. Regular block classes are shortened with the implementation of flex. (many teachers feel 85 minutes is too long and support the shorter classes)	The programming of CTS classes (cosmetology, drama, foods) and physical education are compromised. The addition of flex shortens each block class and does not allow for depth of instruction.
Flex Day	An entire day, usually once per month, is dedicated to flex time.	Teachers who require this instructional time with their regular class may still request their students to attend during the regularly scheduled time. This avoids losing instructional time for diploma classes.	Students perceive this as being a free day. Attendance may be an issue.
Early Exit	When mastery learning is achieved, student may exit the class to pursue another topic	Students requiring teacher support are left in the class with an improved teacher to student ratio. Students showing mastery may be challenged elsewhere.	Funding this schedule may be an issue. Support and resources are needed for this program to be successful.

The flex time is a relatively simple concept of adjusting the schedule to build in time for student choice. According to Alberta Education (2011), flex time is being considered for two reasons.

First, it is an attempt to hand over some control of learning to the student so that they might have the opportunity to use time with teachers in a manner that best suits their individual emerging needs. The second reason for its implementation is to allow students choice to pursue areas of interest that may not be available to them in regularly scheduled time (p. 15).

The use of flex time has naturally created a more personalized, flexible learning environment.

Schools are becoming more focused on the student and their individual needs (Alberta Education, 2011). According to Alberta Education (2011), “flex time has introduced the concept of student direction into the culture of these schools and has left school communities to explore ways to support student choice in a manner that keeps the process of learning moving forward” (p. 15). However, with this increased flexibility and autonomy, the question arises, are students mature and motivated to make good decisions about their own learning?

Accountability. The second component of a flex model design explores the need for student accountability. Some students are motivated to use flex time for remedial help or enrichment, whereas other students are not motivated to take advantage of this opportunity on their own. In discussion with colleagues around Alberta, there is considerable debate among educators as to whether or not attendance should be taken during flex time.

Student motivation is an important factor when deciding on whether or not to take attendance during a flex block. The argument has been made that flex time gives students the opportunity to take ownership of their learning. It gives them the control to make decisions about when and where to spend their time (Alberta Education, 2011). Therefore, in discussion with colleagues, it was determined that many of the pilot schools in the HSFEP in Alberta did not take attendance during the flex time for this reason. As a result, one colleague from M.E. Lazerte High School, estimated attendance was at most 30% of the population during flex time (Dunkley, personal communication,

July, 2013). The question arises, should students be held accountable through attendance taking measures?

Flexible scheduling gives students the ability to select where and how to spend their flex time. History shows the motivated student was able to use time wisely and make good decisions but the unmotivated student lacked focus and discipline and truancy issues arose (Cunningham, 1973). As flexible scheduling models develop today, schools must decide how much control to give students with flex time. Should students be held accountable through attendance taking measures? I imagine, some would argue that students need to take ownership for their own learning and attendance taking stifles this process. Others would argue that students may select where and what to learn during flex time but it must be in an assignable space since flex time isn't free time.

According to Fischhoff (2008), giving students the opportunity to make their own decisions is important to their development. If that decision making ability is overestimated, teens will face choices that are too difficult and they will fail, if it is underestimated, then they will be kept from exercising warranted independence. "If teens believe that the boundaries of their autonomy have been drawn wrongly, then they may feel unfairly restricted or unfairly left to fend for themselves" (p. 1). The opportunity for an adolescent to make decisions and experience the consequences helps prepare them for later life. Giving students the power to choose how to spend their flex time is important in their decision making development.

In discussion with colleagues at Salisbury Composite High, taking attendance during the flex block seemed to be important to many teachers. Teachers acknowledged that flex time permits student choice, however, they should be held accountable to choose some activity whether it be remedial help, enrichment, group work, computer work or individual study. However, as we progress through the planning stage, my colleagues and I are starting to question the amount of space available for this to occur. If every student must attend, then every teacher must supervise and will

be responsible for approximately twenty to thirty students. There will be no room for teacher collaboration since all teachers will be required to supervise and the large number of students participating will make it impossible to run small-group work sessions. It is unknown how many schools in Alberta actually take attendance during the flex block but in discussion with colleagues I would venture to say the majority of schools do not take attendance.

The lack of maturity and motivation of some high school students to utilize the flex time can be an issue. Historical research indicates non-academic students are not successful with modular schedules (Fish, 1960). Knowing this, schools must provide a way to mentor students to become self-directed learners, (whether attendance is taken or not); it is a learned behaviour, not one that comes naturally. The teacher advisory group can provide some assistance to help students make good decisions to support their learning during flex time.

Teacher Advisory Groups (TAG). The third component of a flex model is TAG. TAG is an organization of teachers and students in small groups which meet to personalize the schooling experience for adolescents (Ziegler, 1993). This group may meet on a regular basis to promote students' educational, personal, and social development. The intent of this program is to give students the opportunity to form a bond with a teacher that may not occur naturally in a classroom setting where contact is brief and often content driven. The teacher advisory group connects students to a teacher who is available as a mentor for both educational program planning and a social agenda which emphasizes a connection and sense of belonging in the school community.

Case study. Ziegler (1993) examined a high school (grades 9-12) in Pasco County, Florida that implemented a teacher advisory group. He found that more than one quarter of the staff resisted the program. The teachers felt unprepared for their role as advisors and were concerned about the time that would be required for meeting and record-keeping. At first, groups only met bi-weekly, and that proved to be inadequate to meet the individual student needs. The meeting time then

increased to 35 minutes per week, with daily meetings for the first 2 weeks of school. The teacher was required to meet with each student individually at least once per semester in addition to at least one parent contact per semester. The ratio of teachers to students was between 20:1 and 30:1. Over time, teacher support improved. With continually professional development and support, teachers felt more comfortable in the role of advisor.

As a result, dramatic improvements in attendance occurred and the percentage of students entering colleges and universities increased. In addition, students perceived their school as having clear expectations, better organizational structure and higher levels of teacher support and involvement. The TAG was a deliberate way to facilitate the creation of meaningful relationships within the school environment. Ziegler (1993) summarized the key components of a successful teacher advisory group to include; strong principal support, careful planning, high quality and frequent staff development opportunities. The flexible schedule compliments the teacher advisory program by building in time for the meetings to occur.

Course Groupings. The fourth component of a flex model is appropriate course groupings. Not all courses require the same amount of time to cover the learning outcomes and not all students need the same amount of time to achieve mastery learning. The HSFEP (Alberta Education, 2011) allowed schools the option to explore course groupings to effectively utilize time. Combination courses provide students with the opportunity to complete more credits for coursework in a standard block of time. Table 2 provides some examples of course groupings from schools participating schools in the HSFEP (Alberta Education, 2009).

Table 2

Course Groupings

School	Course	Description
Archbishop O’Leary Edmonton, AB	Fast Track Social Studies 10-1, 20-1, 30 -1	One full year of high school to complete all three courses. (“this accelerated program

		proved very successful with 100% of the students receiving their credits in Social Studies 301 and the cohort scoring an average of 71% on the Diploma Examination”
Archbishop O’Leary Edmonton, AB	Math 35 AP	Combination of in-class and out-of class meeting times
Catholic Central High Lethbridge, AB	Science 14/24 and Math10–3, 20-3	Students progress at an individual pace
Grande Prairie Composite High Grande Prairie, AB	Music and Physical Education	Quartered semesters
M.E. Lazerte High School, Edmonton, AB	CALM 20 and Physical Ed. combined	One block of time
M.E. Lazerte High School Edmonton, AB	Intensive 30-level courses combine Math 30/31 English 30/2 – 30/1 Physics 30/ Chem 30	Writing a diploma exam or final exam in November and one in January

The examples listed above demonstrate the diversity of each school. Not only do the students have different needs, but the teachers must be equipped and prepared to change their teaching practices as well. Combined courses require teachers to be familiar with the content of all combined subjects. This further supports the government’s philosophy for high school redesign to occur at the school level. Alberta Education does not mandate high school redesign initiatives, rather, the planning, development and implementation is dictated by individual school needs (Alberta Education, 2009).

Credit Recovery. The fifth component of flex is credit recovery. Students may obtain credits for their coursework by utilizing the credit recovery program. If a student is not successful in a course by the end of the semester, the student may be given more time and support (during flex time) to demonstrate mastery learning without repeating the entire course again (Alberta Education, 2011). For example, flex time may be used for teachers to work with students in mathematics to

understand a topic before re-writing a chapter exam. This extra time enables the student to get the help they need in a smaller, more individualized setting to obtain the requirements necessary to receive course credit.

The success of this program depends on the teachers' willingness to individualize the learning environment for their students. In addition, it is important that measures are in place that students do not abuse the credit recovery process. Students who do not make the effort during class time, within the standard schedule, should not be given the opportunity for credit recovery. This program is intended to help students who work hard but need remedial support or extra time for successful completion of a course. The credit recovery option is another tool used to personalize the learning environment for students.

Conclusion

The goal of high school redesign is to meet the students' individual needs by addressing the foundational principles outlined by Alberta Education. The flexible schedule is a mechanism used to shift the work of schools from being school and teacher-centred to being student-centred and outcome-centred. The role of an educator has changed or should be changing from a deliverer of content to an individual who provides mentorship and guidance in the learning process. Ultimately, a 21st century teacher should help a student learn how to learn. By examining schedules throughout history, it became apparent that staff training and development was essential. Teachers need to have an understanding about their role in education and be supported through the change process. Students must also be given the opportunity to take ownership of their learning; however, they must be guided through the process. Students who are able to handle the responsibility should be given more freedom than those who are unmotivated or too immature to make good choices.

Flex time may be effective in the high school redesign process if both teachers and students are educated on how to use this time appropriately. After all, every student learns at a different rate

and has different needs. Self-directed learning opportunities will improve the education of many students.

The flex block, accountability, teacher advisory groups, course groupings, and credit recovery programs are important concepts for personalizing the learning environment and improving student success in high school. Chapter 3 will discuss the implementation of these five high school redesign components at my high school in the coming years.

Chapter 3 – Flex Time Implementation

Introduction

As stated in Chapter 1, the high school redesign process is unique to each school's individual context. Therefore, as a teacher at Salisbury Composite High School in Sherwood Park, Alberta, I am primarily interested in developing an implementation plan for the flex initiative which is unique and best suited to my school. The literature review in the previous chapter discussed the seven components of high school redesign (i.e., mastery learning, rigorous and relevant curriculum, personalization, flexible learning environments, educator roles and professional development, meaningful relationships and home and community involvement) which could be used at the school level as themes for high school redesign. The intent of the FLEX initiative is to develop a school-based program to address the themes of high school redesign. Therefore, during the planning and development of the flex block, it will be important to consider how each of the five components of flex (flex schedule, student accountability, TAG, course groupings and credit recovery) affects the seven underlying themes of high school redesign. Does the flex schedule help students achieve mastery learning? How does course groupings provide rigorous and relevant curriculum? What components of teacher advisory groups need to be in place to ensure meaningful relationships are established? These are just a few of the questions that need to be addressed before moving forward with the flex initiative. The intent of this chapter is to provide an overview of the school and context in which the flex block has recently been introduced. In addition, each of the five components of flex (flex schedule, student accountability, TAG, course groupings and credit recovery) will be unpacked to present a comprehensive implementation plan for flex at Salisbury school for the upcoming school year.

School Context

Demographics. Salisbury Composite High School (Salisbury) is one of three public high schools located in Sherwood Park, Alberta. The school population consists of approximately 1000 students in grades 10 – 12 and 50 teachers. Salisbury offers a diverse range of programs which includes the International Baccalaureate (IB) program for honors students in addition to Knowledge and Employability (K&E) and Steps to Enhance Personal Success (STEPS) for students with special needs. In addition to multiple core subject offerings, the school provides students the opportunity to participate in CTS programs, (Communication Technology, Construction, Welding, Automotives, Cosmetology, Foods) Fine Art courses, (Art, Band, Drama) and other courses (Wellness, Leadership). The students benefit from a diverse range of course offerings due to the size of the school. In addition, teachers are able to work within the scope of their major or minor subject area due to the volume of courses offered. There is both administrative and staff support towards the planning and development of a flex block to improve student learning.

Background and Planning. The first meeting regarding flex was held during a professional development session in October 2014. The administration invited all teachers who were interested in flex to attend the meeting. Approximately 20 teachers attended from a range of subject areas. The principal stated she was interested in trying out some type of flex block this year and asked for teacher feedback. The first question posed was, why are we doing this? The response of the principal mirrored the HSFEP (2011) rationale by indicating that flex time provided students with more choice about what they wanted to learn. Students would have the opportunity to work on enrichment activities or receive remedial support and this dedicated time would ultimately help students.

Another teacher questioned teacher workload. If teachers already have four classes out of four to teach in a day, and now a flex block is added, where will there be time to prepare for flex?

The response was that flex could compliment what is already occurring in the classroom. Flex time could be used to reinforce a concept that was missed the first time. The questions and answers continued for some time and it was apparent that some teachers were excited about this change and others were resistant. At the end of the meeting the staff members were able to vote on the time commitment to flex. It was agreed upon that starting December 2014 flex would occur once per week, on Thursdays, between block one and two in the morning for a duration of forty minutes. The next step was to determine what sessions should be offered.

Session Offerings. Flex block was initially introduced right before final exams for semester one courses in January 2014. Therefore, the majority of flex time offerings were dedicated to tutorials, open study space and computer lab time to complete assignments. Each department was required to outline what sessions were going to be offered and which teacher was responsible. For example, the math department decided to offer an online practice exam for diploma courses, extra help sessions specific to grade level, and a session for math games.

Students were required to register for sessions through a program called PowerSchool (a program students currently use for gradebook and regular course registration). Teachers enter a description of their session at least two weeks in advance so students are able to make a selection based on their individual needs. The teachers are able to restrict the number of participants in each session. However, given the student population is approximately 1000 and attendance is mandatory, with a staff of fifty, each teacher was responsible for an average of twenty students.

The second semester (February – June 2015) session offerings will consist of programs which do not require a lot of additional preparation or collaboration time. Teachers have not been given any additional planning time or support for flex and therefore new learning experiences for the students will be kept to a minimum. There will continue to be remedial support, open space for group collaboration or individual study time, some special interest classes in the CTS areas and some

peer tutoring. As the year progresses, teachers will adjust the flex time offerings according to student need.

Observations. Salibury jumped into the flex block practice very quickly. After one meeting with staff it was decided that flex would happen on a weekly basis. In addition, teacher advisory groups (TAG) were introduced in December. Each teacher was assigned a group of approximately 20 students to oversee from all grade levels (I was only familiar with two of my students). Teachers were responsible for presenting the flex concept to students and helping students to register for sessions. A presentation guide was given for each of the teachers to follow. During informal conversations with peers, many of my colleagues expressed a lack of confidence to describe the rationale behind flex because they lacked understanding themselves. Although I support learning through experience, the dialogue between stakeholders needs to be consistent and continual as everyone works together through this process.

Reflection. After experiencing the implementation of flex at my school, I consider what worked well and what needs further consideration and this reflection has ultimately become the topic for my Capstone paper in this Masters program. First, my principal has always been open and supportive of change. She has welcomed any feedback and considered all viewpoints before making a decision. Second, the decision to introduce the flex block this year sent a message to staff and students that a change was needed. Many discussions have resulted from this action. Teachers are reflecting on the need for the school to become more student-centred and less teacher driven. In addition, with the removal of the 25-hour per credit requirement, there is a trend towards outcome based assessment. The principal considers this year a test, she calls it “getting our feet wet” (C. Allen, personal communication, October 2014).

The discussions resulting from this process are helping to formulate the high school redesign plan for the 2015/2016 school year. Based on the staff and student feedback from this trial period, I

believe the flex block is here to stay. However, I do believe many changes to the current structure need to occur. The flex block needs to occur on a more regular basis, attendance to flex sessions should not be mandatory for all students (to avoid large group settings), TAG need to be created to include students familiar to the staff, course groupings should be offered and credit recovery parameters need to be created.

Flex Block (2015/2016)

The HSFEP (2013) created the opportunity for 16 schools across Alberta to develop and implement a variety of high school redesign programs. Each participating school was funded through Alberta Education based on the historical average of the student CEU (credit enrolment unit). Although the participating principals in the project unanimously voted to remove the 25 hour per credit requirement for funding, Alberta Education has not made a decision regarding the future funding model (Alberta Education, 2013). It would therefore be premature at this time to implement any major structural changes to the schedule which would impact the average CEU per student at Salisbury. One must also be aware of teacher workload and assignable time limitations. According to the Government of Alberta (2011) “the flex initiative should create more time for teacher collaboration and reduce both staff and student stress” (p. 6). These are important factors to consider when structuring time to benefit both the students and the staff.

Fullan (2000) observed that educational reform required a staff commitment to change at the classroom level. Therefore, although the literature review and case studies support mastery learning and a personalized learning approach, the flex initiative may only be successful, when teachers are both willing and able to change. I believe that positive changes will occur when staff are committed to the effort of change because they understand the value of high school redesign. This commitment may be strengthened through dialogue regarding the work of *Inspiring Education* (2010) and the development of the vision for Alberta education.

Before any implementation of flex, teachers should understand what it means to develop the 3 E's in students. How do we create Engaged students, Ethical citizens with an Entrepreneurial spirit? The focus on the 3 E's essentially address character development and core competencies in students. The vision for education in Alberta is to develop students who are engaged in their studies, possess strong communication, collaboration and teamwork skills in addition to developing a drive to succeed through hard work and dedication.

The flex block gives students the opportunity to develop the 3 E's. Students are required to self-assess and identify where they need to spend their time. The student demonstrates a commitment to their own studies when they seek extra help. During the flex block students may work together in small groups which supports the development of collaboration and teamwork. In addition, students are engaged because they selected what session they were personally interested in attending. According to Alberta Education (2013), the flex block provides students the opportunity to become self-directed learners, which in my mind, reinforces the development of the 3 E's.

When discussing an implementation plan for flex, my principal indicated that Salisbury has permission from district office to experiment with different options as long as it aligns with the vision of developing the 3 E's (Cathy Allen, personal communication, Nov 2015). The guiding principles of high school redesign may also be considered during the planning process. Which flex schedule will help students achieve mastery learning? How do teachers develop meaningful relationships with students and between students? How do we personalize the learning environment for individual students? These questions all break down to a school's ability to create an educational system to facilitate the growth and development of the 3 E's in students; Engaged Thinker, Ethical Citizens and Entrepreneurial Spirits. Figure 1 illustrates the work from Alberta Education (2010) and Inspiring Education (2010) in regards to how every FLEX initiative decision needs to address the higher levels.

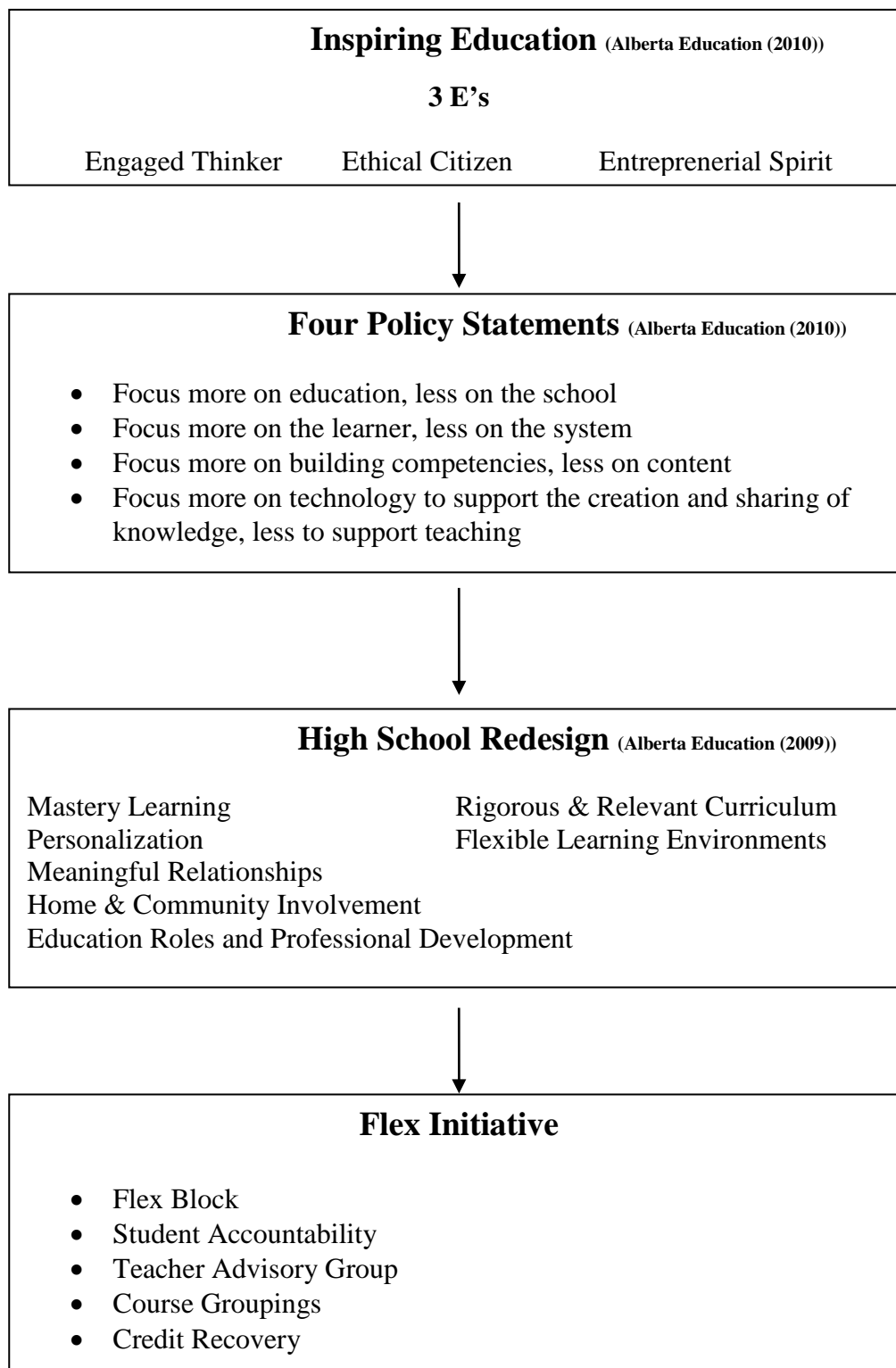


Figure 1. FLEX and Higher Order Processing

Figure 1 may be referenced when making decisions in regards to the flex initiative. It is important to consider how decisions made at the base level (flex components) effect the higher levels, themes of

high school redesign, policy statements and ultimately development of the 3 E's. Ultimately, every decision needs to reflect on the impact of the development of the 3 E's in students as mandated in the Ministerial Order from Alberta Education (2010). The next section will examine each component of flex and how particular themes of high school redesign may be effected by the specific recommendations.

Flex Components

Schedule. Currently Salisbury operates within a school year comprised of two semesters with 85 minute blocks, four times per day. The introduction of the flex block has been limited to once per week for 40 minutes, reducing regular class lengths to 75 minutes on the day flex is offered. As a core teacher, I believe 85 minutes is too long for students to stay engaged in class and I would be in favor of reducing this time on a daily basis. In discussion with colleagues, many schools throughout Alberta have already reduced their instructional time per block to incorporate a daily flex block into the schedule. The flex block structure next school year may remain the same at once per week for 40 minutes or it may increase to daily with a length of 40 to 60 minutes. Although I recommend the movement towards a daily flex block, staff members throughout the school must be willing to accept the change. The staff at Salisbury need to meet to identify the needs of the students in order to develop a schedule that supports the students and school priorities.

To implement an optimal schedule for next year, the goals for the school need to be outlined. The purpose of the flex block needs to be articulated and staff need to work together to create a program that addresses the school goals. For example, if teachers deem TAG to be important, more time needs to be dedicated to the development of these teacher-student relationships. If teacher collaboration time is deemed important, time needs to be dedicated for teachers to meet to collaborate with one another. If credit recovery is deemed important, time and support needs to be dedicated for teachers to meet with students for this process to occur. If course groupings are

deemed important, additional time needs to be dedicated for additional support for students. If the flex block only occurs once per week, there will not be enough time to meet these goals. Flex time must be given an adequate amount of time to meet the goals outlined by the staff.

It is my observation that the minimal amount of time currently dedicated to flex, limits the program potential. Currently, the weekly flex block is used primarily for remedial support. I would recommend the flex block be increased to 60 minutes per day Tuesday to Friday with late entry for students on Monday (staff meetings would occur during this time). This recommendation is based on both the principles of high school redesign and development of the 3 E's.

The personalization and flexible learning environments for students are two guiding principles of high school redesign. The implementation of a daily flex block enables students the freedom and flexibility to spend time where they need to in order to support their own learning. Mastery learning may occur when students identify their own needs through self-assessment and seek remedial help during flex. The daily flex block also enables the TAG program to occur. This program supports the development of teacher-student relationships, which is also a principle of high school redesign. When considering weekly or daily flex time, my recommendation would be for flex to occur daily so staff and students would have adequate time to personalize the learning environment. The flex block should offer some flexibility to students on how and where to spend their time. The next section will address student accountability within the flex block and whether or not attendance should be mandatory.

Accountability. During flex time students are responsible for their own learning. Does that mean that if a student chooses not to attend a flex session that is their choice? Will these students eventually realize their actions have consequences? It is naïve to think that all students are both rational and mature enough to make their own decisions. However, if students are not given the opportunity to learn from the consequences of their decisions, how will they ever become

responsible? Although taking attendance contributes to positive behavior, does it develop the 3 E's in students?

In the previous chapter, we discussed student maturity through the work of Fischhoff (2008). He expressed the need for students to make decisions and experience consequences that helps prepare them for later life. Giving students the power to choose how to spend their flex time is important in their decision making development. However, conversely, Zepeda and Meyers (2006) attributed the failure of the flexible module schedule to student discipline and attendance issues. When considering current practices throughout Alberta, many colleagues report attendance rates to be lower than 40 percent of the student population when attendance is not taken during flex. Fish (1960) reported that non-academic students were not successful with the flexible schedule model. When considering all research, I recommend students should have the ability to earn the right to be exempt from mandatory attendance during the flex block.

Students who demonstrate maturity through good decision making should not be held to the same accountability standards as students who are lacking in maturity. The flex block is meant to provide time for students to decide what and where they learn. If a student has been working hard, attending all their classes and been maintaining good grades, why should they be mandated to attend flex block sessions? Perhaps these students would benefit from a break during the day to reduce stress. Students who are deemed mature enough to handle it should be given the ability to make their own decisions. However, making good decisions is a learning process that may require modelling.

I recommend attendance should be taken for all students at the beginning of the year or semester so students have the opportunity to experience the value of the flex block. After the first month, any students that have good attendance and academic standing should be exempt from attendance taking measures. This accountability model would provide students with a sense of

ownership and they may appreciate the independence. In addition, the teacher-student ratio would be lower and therefore those students needing the extra support would receive more attention from the teacher. The relationships between teachers and students may also be strengthened with smaller groups. In the next section we will consider how TAG also support meaningful relationships.

Teacher Advisory Groups (TAG). The intent of the TAG is to “promote students’ educational, personal, and social development” (Toronto Board of Education, 1993, p. 1). These advisory groups are structured to support the development of the 3 E’s and meaningful relationships. The educational agenda requires students to be engaged and actively participating in their own education planning through the support of their advisor. The social agenda “emphasizes strengthening self-concept and peer group relationships. Activities typically emphasize decision making and problem solving and communication skills” (p. 1). The TAG may be a powerful tool to developing both relationships and core competencies in students when adequate time and resources are given to this program.

The Toronto Board of Education (1993) conducted a research study to identify the role of the advisory group, how it is structured and what evidence do we have for its success. The research provided evidence to suggest improvement in students’ attendance and achievement with TAG. In addition, meaningful relationships were established to “connect adults and young people in ways which are genuinely educational and community-enhancing” (p. 7). Many advisory groups consisted of a cross grade of students. The length of meeting times varied, however, one school in Paco County, Florida, reported meeting daily for 35 minutes during the first two weeks followed by weekly for the duration of the year. The advisor met with each student at least once per semester, and usually every six weeks. Parent contacts also occurred at least once per semester (Toronto Board of Education, 1993). The consistency of positive results observed in this research supports my recommendation for Salisbury to incorporate a TAG into the flex block next year.

There is great potential for the TAG at Salisbury to help establish meaningful relationships. However, the advisory groups need to be scheduled to meet an appropriate amount of time to achieve the desired benefits. The current schedule (TAG meeting every 6-8 weeks) does not support the goals of advisory groups. Next year, the TAG should meet on a daily basis for the first two weeks of school. This would give teachers and students an opportunity to develop relationships with one another. In addition, grade 10 students entering the school may feel a sense of belonging with these groups in place. These groups should continue to meet on a weekly basis during one of the scheduled flex blocks. Teachers would have the opportunity during this time to provide activities which emphasized both the educational and social agenda of the school. Before next year it would be important for the following to occur;

- teachers should be familiar with the goals of TAG and a committee should be formed,
- TAG groups should consist of cross grade mixing with a maximum of 20 – 30 students per teacher,
- teachers should be allowed to request specific students into their grouping,
- a calendar should be created to outline the activity schedule for TAG,
- a handbook should be created to support teachers through this process. It may include activities, tracking sheets for both student and parent contact, references for educational guidance (program requirements),
- and, teachers should be linked to a guidance counsellor as additional support may be required.

Although I recommend the implementation of TAG at Salisbury, we must be careful to plan each session's activities to ensure it is a positive experience. The program will not be successful if the onus is on the teacher to develop plans for each TAG session. Both teachers and students need to

understand the goal of TAG is to create a positive climate in the school where relationships and individuals matter.

Course Groupings. The removal of the 25-hour per credit requirement in participating schools from Alberta Education enables high schools to consider course groupings. For example, in Chapter One I discussed the CALM and Physical Education combined course currently offered at M.E. Lazerte High School in Edmonton. In Chapter Two I listed a number of course groupings that are already occurring in schools throughout Alberta. The interesting observation is that every school is offering something different. I would attribute this to the different needs of the school in addition to the timetable and staff requirements. As a mathematics teacher, I am familiar with the math curriculum and can therefore make recommendations based on my experience of both the content and staff requirements. However, it would be difficult to recommend specifics for other departments without having a working knowledge. Teachers in each department would need to consider whether or not combining courses would benefit student learning in our school.

There are many options for course groupings with the support of a schedule change. However, options are limited if the schools' only change to the schedule is the introduction of a single flex block offered daily (which is my current recommendation for Salisbury). I recommend our school only introduces combined courses as an extension of a class already within a students' timetable. For example, combining Math 10-3 and 20-3 would enable hard working students in this course to receive 10 credits in math within one semester. The Math 10-3 course would be offered during the regular scheduled block. The Math 20-3 content would be presented to students as needed within the flex block. Students would have time to complete the required assignments and assessments within the standard math block in addition to flex time. This course grouping recognizes the potential of each student. As a non-academic course, the -3 math courses build in time for students needing extra support and to catch up if students miss class. Therefore, students

who do not require additional support are not always challenged at this level. The option to receive the required 10 credits in math during a single semester may motivate some students to attend class and work hard to complete the math requirements for high school. Based on my personal case study outlined in Chapter One, I predict student participation, motivation and attendance will improve with a combined course offering.

Students may have the opportunity to complete high school requirements within either a condensed timeframe or an extended timeframe if course groupings occur. It is estimated by my colleagues that approximately 25% of students enrolled in Math 10 Common are not successful in the course. The recommendation for next year is to offer a combined Math 10-3 and Math 10 Common course (full-year for 10 credits) to build basic math skills that prepare students for the rigor of the next level of math. Although this course combination does not fall under the implementation of the flex block, it reinforces the redesign efforts of our high school to improve student learning. Teachers are beginning to question the individual needs of the students and how our educational system may be redesigned to address the diverse needs of our students. Credit recovery is another program that supports individual needs and offers personalization within the school.

Credit Recovery. The concept of credit recovery supports both mastery learning and personalization. At the end of a semester, if a student has not been successful in the course, both the teacher and student should be able to identify the shortcomings. According to Fijal (2011), schools are looking at each individual case to determine the extent of the learning gaps that exist in a student's understanding of course outcomes and then determine the next best course of action. In some cases, this course of action is to provide some additional time and alternative resources to a student to address deficiencies and assign a final grade when the student has mastered the outcomes at a proficient level (p. 17).

The success of the credit recovery program depends on both the teachers and students ability to recognize learning gaps. According to Bloom (1971), mastery learning requires appropriate formative assessments to guide student learning. Teachers need to be cognisant to directly link assessments to specific learning outcomes. The presense of appropriate assessments enables individual cases to be reviewed for credit recovery purposes. If a student fails one unit in math, the credit recovery program may be helpful. The flex block may be utilized to provide support to students who need to achieve mastery learning in a limited number of outcomes. The students would need to be reviewed on an individual basis to ensure the gap in learning occurred through lack of understanding or poor circumstances as opposed to laziness and lack of motivation the first time around.

I recommend credit recovery for Salisbury next year, however, the parameters must be carefully outlined. The 3 E's in students focuses on the development of responsible students who are motivated to work hard to achieve success. If educators are always giving second chances through credit recovery and exam re-writes, what message are we portraying to the students? The students need to be aware that credit recovery is a privilege for a select number of students who deserve additional support. These students have proven to take ownership for their learning during the regular scheduled time, however lacked the understanding to be successful within the given timeframe.

The credit recovery program may only be successful with adequate attention and resources. First, the learning gaps for each individual must be identified. Second, resources and assessments need to be developed to concentrate on the learning outcomes required. Third, a teacher needs to be dedicated to each student to achieve mastery learning. Teachers will be required to provide additional instructional time to work with the student in addition to creating, administering and marking the given assessments. The credit recovery program

is time consuming and a drain on resources, however, it would be worth the time and effort to help the students who are deemed a good fit.

My principal supports credit recovery but states there are currently no funds available for dedicated resources and staffing. This program must operate within the limitations of the flex block. The credit recovery program will put a strain on the teacher to student ratio if mandatory attendance for all students continues. I believe the success of this program depends on the ability to lower the teacher to student ratio for individual attention to occur. Currently, the teacher to student ratio during flex time is on average 1:20. The participation of three teachers in this program increases the average teacher to student ratio to 1:22. Some students should be able to earn the right to be exempt from mandatory attendance which would ultimately give time to those students who truly need the extra teacher support.

The credit recovery program is perhaps the most controversial of all components of flex time. Without adequate parameters, students may assume they have the right to complete missed assignments or simply try again after failing the first time. The concept of personalization and flexibility may swing too far and actually cause detrimental effects if educators are not careful. We must remember the ultimate goal of the flex initiative is to develop the 3 E's in our students. The vision from *Inspiring Education* is to develop engaged students who take responsibility for their learning and are driven to be successful individuals. The credit recovery program must encourage students to take ownership of their learning, working on their deficits after their hard work and dedication during the allotted time has already been observed.

Conclusion

High schools throughout Alberta, including my own, have been given the opportunity to transform educational practices to meet individual student needs. However, it is important

to recognize that not all staff members are excited about change. The process of change must occur at a pace that both teachers and students are able to handle. The weekly offering of the flex block this year at Salisbury is a great introduction to the possibilities of the flex initiative. This schedule gives stakeholders an opportunity to experience the flex block in a limited capacity and consider the potential for the future.

The work of *Inspiring Education* provides the staff at Salisbury with the vision for education in Alberta through the development of the 3 E's. It is our role as educators to reflect on our current practices and align ourselves with an educational program that achieves the vision articulated by Albertans. In addition, the seven guiding principles of high school redesign, as identified by Alberta Education (2009), gives educators a basis for redesign efforts. The process of implementing a flex block may support mastery learning, personalization, flexible learning environments, professional development, meaningful relationships, rigorous and relevant curriculum and home and community involvement. However, the parameters around the flex block need to carefully be considered to ensure the vision for education is being achieved.

Parameters. First, the flex block needs to occur daily to support the programs within the flex initiative. These programs include remedial support, enrichment activities, cross-curricular projects, teacher advisory groups, course groupings and credit recovery. Second, students should be able to earn the right to be exempt from mandatory attendance during flex. The research supports the need to give students the autonomy to make their own decisions and take ownership for their learning. However, this privilege is only extended to students who have proven to be mature enough to handle the responsibility. Third, TAG should exist and meet on a weekly basis. This program supports the development of relationships and sense of community within the school. Fourth, course groupings should occur when two

courses may be combined within a single block in addition to occasional flex block support. Finally, credit recovery should be an option for individual students who have been identified to have learning gaps. The program should be restricted for students who have a limited number of learning gaps and worked hard during the original course.

The parameters outlined in this chapter have been supported primarily through the work of Inspiring Education (2010) and Alberta Education (2009). However, the dialogue with teachers currently experiencing flex initiatives within their schools has been invaluable. The HSFEP (Alberta Education, 2013) contributed to the recommendation by participating principals to permanently remove the 25-hour per credit requirement. The decision from Alberta Education has not been made at this point in January 2015. However, I would remain optimistic that the funding model for schools does not dramatically change which may impede the progressive movement towards flex initiatives. I believe schools will continue with high school redesign efforts if given the autonomy and financial support to implement these changes. Many of my colleagues share my optimism about the future of education in Alberta. It is an exciting time to be an educator!

Chapter 4 – Reflection

Introduction

Building relationships is essential to the education system. It is my personal belief that exceptional teachers personalize the learning environment for their students. Before this Masters Course I believed that an exceptional teacher understood the content and taught the curriculum well. I now have a greater appreciation for the word “curriculum”. In this chapter I will discuss how my focus on the implicit curriculum currently influences my teaching practice. In addition, I will discuss why it is necessary to develop a strong teacher – student relationship for effective teaching to occur. In addition to my personal development as a classroom teacher, I will also discuss how this course has developed my skills and abilities as a practitioner researcher and leader within my professional learning community. Finally, I will conclude this chapter with the three key recommendations for researchers to continue with my paper on high school redesign to include; developing a funding model not based on credits, creating a teacher advisory handbook, and developing an accountability strategy for attendance.

Beliefs and Values

Curriculum. According to Eisner (2004), the explicit curriculum is “a prescribed set of outcomes to develop knowledge and skills” (p. 96). In Alberta, the Program of Studies would be the explicit curriculum. As a new teacher, I believed that students would learn math by writing down notes off the board, students would practice problems and write the exams. When students did not do well, I would assign additional problems to practice and students would have the opportunity to re-write the exams to improve their mark. As I worked my way through this course and began to reflect on the purpose of the Program of Studies and the curriculum, I began to consider the purpose of high school mathematics.

Although it is important for students to understand mathematical constructs, and it is important to teach the content outlined in the Program of Studies, as a teacher, I believe it is more important to get students to think for themselves, take responsibility for their learning, develop skills to find answers on their own and work in a collaborative environment to figure out problems together. This shift in thinking pulls my teaching towards a focus on the implicit curriculum. Eisner (2004) explains the implicit curriculum to “include a process in which students develop beliefs and values, developed from the learning experience” (p. 96). When I give students time to work on a problem together, I am implying teamwork is important. When I ask a student to complete an extra assignment and show evidence of learning prior to re-writing an exam, I am implying the importance of students taking responsibility for their own learning. As a teacher I need to work with students to develop a sense of responsibility and ownership. The implicit curriculum, the beliefs and values I instil as a teacher are just as important, if not more important than the explicit curriculum outlined in the Program of Studies. However, to develop a strong belief system and core values in the students, a strong teacher – student relationship must be developed.

Teacher – Student Relationship. I believe one of my roles as an educator is to establish a strong relationship with my students. Before this Masters’ Course I believed my role was to deliver the curriculum. I did not realize the complexity of the teaching process. I did not pause to consider how my students processed information. I assumed they would adjust to my teaching style. However, as we worked through this course, I began to reflect on individual differences and the need to address unique needs. As I began to question my teaching practices I began to have more discussions with my students and quickly realized the need to address individual differences. During the past two years I have gained a better appreciation for the unique needs through the development of the teacher – student relationship.

A teacher – learner relationship is based on the ability of a teacher to react to the needs of a

student. Through my experience as a mathematics teacher I am now able to modify my lessons based on the reaction of my students. I am able to provide further details if necessary and change the direction of my lesson to support the learner. This example reinforces the concept from Loughran (2010) that states, “teaching influences learning and learning influences teaching” (p. 36). I think Loughran hit this concept dead on. It is through a relationship with my students that we influence one another’s decisions and thought processes.

The individual student needs may only be met if teachers understand the needs of the student. To identify these needs, a teacher must first identify with the student and identify with the students point of view. The teacher must be able to know the student well enough to understand how the student is able to learn and know the content well enough to adjust the lesson in a manner the students are able to understand. Loughran (2013) refers to the work of Clark and Lampert (1986) to illustrate why from a teachers view, teaching is problematic. It is stated “teachers’ active decision making and the reasoning that directs and informs their practice has a great deal to do with the ways in which teaching and learning experiences unfold in the practice setting” (p. 36). To me, this means that teachers are faced with challenges in a dynamic environment. What may work with one class or more specifically with one student, may not work with another. As teachers, we continually assess the situation, determine if a problem exists and devise a plan to address the concerns. The teacher – student relationship is critical to good teaching as well as devising a plan to address the concerns. This continual cycle of addressing a problem, creating a plan, and evaluating the plan leads us to action research.

Action Research. Action research is an exciting form of research that is relevant and meaningful to the education community. The practitioners’ knowledge of the situation is a critical component for action research to be successful. According to Cochran-Smith, and Lytle, (2009), through the concept of knowledge, knowers, knowing, and, practitioner as researcher, action research

can be a powerful agent of change. The continual process of questioning, evaluating and acting upon findings is significant in the dynamic environment of education.

Participating schools in the High School Redesign Program in Alberta are participating in an action research project. These schools must complete rigorous questionnaires and evaluations throughout the process to determine the programs effectiveness. My school, Salisbury Composite High School, is currently experimenting with a forty minute weekly flex block. Although there is no benchmark to measure its effectiveness, staff and students will weigh in at the end of the year to discuss whether or not to continue with this program next year. The results of the research will vary at each location due to the diversity of each school.

Action research occurring in varying socio-economic climates will lead to different points of focus and outcomes. What works for one school may not apply to another based on specific needs of the community. For these reasons, the ability to conduct action research will be improved when the researcher identifies with the environment under examination. Cochran-Smith, and Lytle, (2009) states, "the assumption that those who work in particular social situations have significant knowledge about those situations" (p. 42). This concept is essential to action research since it is specific to the cultural, economic and social situation of a local environment.

I believe action research is critical to improving the educational environment within my school and within the district. My colleagues and I conduct action research on an on-going basis within our classrooms. We experiment with new methods for teaching mathematical concepts and then compare our results. Through discussion of the results, further planning can occur to advance the quality of education we offer.

Future Professional Career

I began this Master's Course with the goal of becoming a school administrator. During the past two years I have learned that regardless of the position held at the school, we can all be

instructional leaders. My role as a teacher is to serve the interests of the students and to help the school and staff achieve the same goal. Whether I am a teacher, or become an administrator someday, my goal will remain the same, to help students, to focus on student needs.

Instructional Leadership. It is important for instructional leaders to encourage all stakeholders to work hard to achieve school goals. Regardless of my position at the school, I see myself as an instructional leader. Budig and Heaps (2012) state, “education is not about teachers, administrators or lawmakers. It's about the students. If we keep our focus on the students and their welfare, we will have done much to improve the conversation about our schools” (p. 1). According to Hallinger (2005), “the school should have clear, academic goals that staff support and incorporate into their daily practice” (p. 225). My goal as an educator is to work together with my colleagues to improve the learning environment for the students we serve.

Instructional leadership is a powerful system of components that are critical to improving student learning. After experimenting with new approaches teachers will need to reflect and discuss what worked well, and what needs to be improved. There must be a clear vision and goals for the teachers to support and work towards achieving.

The concept of re-writing unit exams has been a heated debate at our school over the past couple of years. Students have a tendency to abuse this district program and therefore teachers would like the district policy to change. As a mathematics teacher I observe first hand the effects of test anxiety. I can see that some students truly struggle with writing exams. I also know how busy students are these days. Over half of my students work at least five days a week or have extra curricular activities that interfere with study time. I am in support of exam re-writes to reduce test anxiety and to make accommodations for those students that are juggling too much outside of school as long as they earn it.

My department has tried many different re-write models over the past two years. Every teacher has tried something different and then we have discussed the results. This year we have finally created a common re-write model where students need to show evidence of learning before re-writing an exam on their own time. Students need to complete an extra assignment and then write the exam during lunch hour or after school. This model has put the onus on the students to take responsibility for their learning. Students must work hard to earn the right to re-write the exam as it is a privilege, not a right. The math department has worked hard to find a compromise between the districts mandate to allow re-writes and the students' tendency to take advantage of the system. Our department members are considered instructional leaders for our work with the re-write policy.

In the future I hope to be a school administrator that can foster the spirit of instructional leaders among the staff. It would be my role to create an organizational environment that encourages teachers to be both leaders and learners in the process of school improvement. I would be available to support and guide teachers to improve and grow. Instructional leadership is an important dimension in any school because according to Beauchamp & Parsons (2012), "effective leadership was specifically linked to successful student learning" (p. 41).

Further Research – High School Redesign

The High School Redesign Initiative was implemented this year at my school, Salisbury Composite High School with the introduction of a weekly forty minute flex block added to the schedule. During this time students were able to choose from a variety of session offerings including tutorials, special interest classes or open space classrooms to work independently or in small groups. The three components requiring further consideration are i) how schools participating in flexible scheduling are funded, ii) creating a teacher advisory handbook to support teachers and iii) creating an accountability model for student attendance during flex time.

Funding. According to my principal, Cathy Allen, Alberta Education gave schools the option this year to be funded under two different models. The first option was to maintain the 25-hour per credit requirement and earn funding per credit from each student. The second option was to have flexible timetabling where schools were no longer required to maintain the 25-hour per credit requirement. Funding would be based on the average credits earned during the three previous school years before the implementation of this option (Allen, personal communication, March 2015). The second funding model enables schools to offer programs to match the time requirements necessary to master the educational outcomes outlined in each course. Our school, Salisbury Composite High, did not select the second option to forego the 25-hour credit requirement because our school would have less funding compared to option one (Allen, personal communication, March 2015). Next year we will still maintain the forty minute flex block per week because we believe in the program, however, our school is unable to offer any additional flexible programming options at this time due to the current funding model. I recommend further research into the funding of the flex model so schools may move forward with flex in the future.

Teacher Advisory Handbook. The teacher advisory role is an opportunity for students to develop relationships with a teacher outside a regularly scheduled class. “The intention of the advisory group concept is to personalize the schooling experience for adolescents” (Ziegler, 1993, p. 1). According to the Toronto Board of Education, advisory groups have a social agenda that emphasizes self-concept and peer group relationships. “Activities typically emphasize academic and career advisement, decision-making and problem-solving, and communication skills (p. 1). As discussed earlier in my research, every teacher is responsible for leading a teacher advisory group. However, some teachers are not comfortable with this role, nor do teachers have the time to plan for the advisory group meetings. Therefore, I recommend a teacher advisory handbook be created as a support for teachers during this process.

The teacher advisory handbook may include a weekly plan for activities during the advisory group meeting. Activities may include ice breaker games, guest speakers to promote personal and social development, education and career planning. Teacher advisors may also be responsible for meeting with each student on an individual basis a certain amount of times per year, communicating with parents and sometimes as a liaison between the student and other teachers. As such, a record keeping section should be included in the handbook to ensure all communication is tracked. In addition, a section for education and career support should be included. This section may include the requirements for high school graduation, information about post-secondary schools and programming requirements for career planning. The teacher advisory handbook would be a great tool to support teachers and therefore I recommend further research into the creation of this handbook.

Student Accountability. During my research on the flex block I discovered student motivation and accountability was a big road block for success. Through discussions with colleagues at other schools, not taking attendance during flex leads to minimal student turnout. However, mandatory attendance results in large class sizes, thereby reducing the amount of individual attention each student receives from the teacher. On average I have 20 students attend a 40 minute flex block which equates to 2 minutes per student. This is not what the flex block was created for! I understood the flex block was created for students to be able to receive remedial help in areas of need in a small-group setting. Therefore, we have a problem. How do we ensure that students attend sessions during the flex block that require the help, but group sizes remain manageable? The decision to not take attendance does not work but either does implementing a mandatory attendance policy. There needs to be a solution somewhere in the middle. I recommend further research into this area to ensure the goals of the flex block are being met and students' needs are being served.

Conclusion

The Master's program has given me a new perspective on the teaching and learning environment. Prior to this course I did not reflect on the purpose behind the content nor did I consider how the educational environment could change to improve the learning opportunities for students. During the past two years I find myself trying new approaches to teaching in my classroom and being more engaged with the administration during conversations about instructional changes for the future. During staff meetings I am mindful of listening to everyone's perspective and appreciating different viewpoints. The research conducted on professional learning communities and instructional leadership has deepened my appreciation for group dynamics and working in collaboration with peers. I look forward to applying what I have learned from this course for years to come.

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Appendix

Reproduced from Alberta Education HSFEP6 Summary Report – 2013. (p. 6-7)

Results

A suite of measures has been collected over the life of the HSFEP6. A good portion of these measures is drawn from the Accountability Pillar and, as such, some of the data will not be fully compiled until late in the 2013-2014 school year. However, there are strong trends that are apparent in the collection of measurable data to this point. These positive trends coupled with anecdotal evidence collected in interviews with principals and staff at participating schools provides a solid foundation for the analysis that follows. This section provides a brief overview of the positive results as well as an outline of the qualitative evidence gathered over the project.

A description of measures collected as well as a presentation of measures collected to date appear in Appendix B of this report.

Over the life of the HSFEP6, participating schools have shown positive trends in the following key measures:

- High School Completion Rate has increased or stayed the same at 69% of the schools;
- Drop-Out Rate has decreased or stayed the same at 94% of the schools;
- Diploma Exam Participation Rate has increased or stayed the same at 69% of the schools;
- Course Completion Rate has increased or stayed the same at 88% of the schools;
- Parents' perception of school improvement has increased or stayed the same at 86% of the schools;
- Teachers' perception of school improvement has increased or stayed the same at 67% of the schools.
- Students' perception of the quality of education has increased or stayed the same at 63% of the schools.

In addition to these results, one of the most significant positive results from across participating schools has been the increase in Intellectual Engagement as measured by the Tell Them From Me Survey. Intellectual Engagement is a composite measure that includes student interest and motivation, their perception of rigour and relevance in their coursework, the effectiveness of learning time and the effort they are extending in their coursework. This measure is trending strongly upwards in 81% of the schools and, as a group, schools participating in the HSFEP are outperforming both Canadian and Alberta norms in Intellectual Engagement.

Qualitative evidence gathered through interviews with participating principals and teachers indicates significant cultural shifts have occurred in schools, with students taking ownership for their learning and teachers showing much more flexibility in supporting all students to succeed. Principals and teachers have reported a much more purposeful atmosphere in their schools and a reduction in disciplinary issues. It is noteworthy that many principals, teachers and students have reported that there is a sense of calm in their school; that overall their schools seems less “stressed-out” and “frantic”. Time is available to all stakeholders to approach learning in a manner that suits them best and is most responsive to the natural “ebb and flow” of the school year.