

Creating Non-instructional Time for Elementary School Teachers

Strategies from Schools in North Carolina

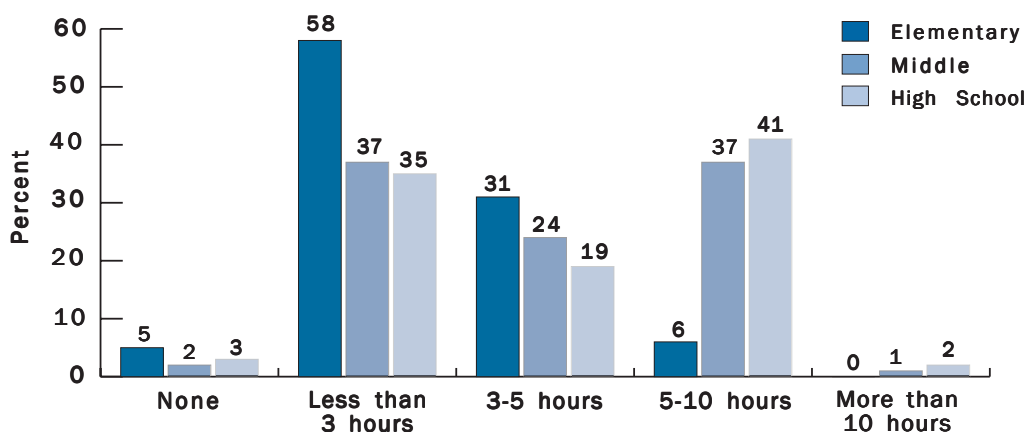
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Research has shown that teachers make more difference in student achievement than any other school factor. In order to make this difference for students, teachers must work in schools that are designed for them to be successful. Teachers thrive in school environments where they have sufficient time to plan, collaborate with colleagues and discuss student work and effective teaching strategies.

Results from the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey indicate that educators believe time is the most critical working condition for improving student learning—more important than leadership, empowerment, professional development and resources. However, it is also the area where teachers are *least likely* to note that positive working conditions are in place at their schools. This is particularly true at the elementary school level.¹ Consider the following.

- More than half of North Carolina educators receive three hours or less of non-instructional time in an average week, and 77 percent receive less than five hours. The problem is particularly acute at the elementary level, where 63 percent receive less than three hours (Figure 1).
- A majority (60 percent) of high school teachers believe the non-instructional time they receive is sufficient, but only about one-third (37 percent) of elementary teachers agree.
- When non-instructional time is available, it is often not time that can be used collaboratively. Almost half (44 percent) of high school teachers and one-quarter of elementary educators report no time in an average week to work with their colleagues.

Figure 1. Percent of Teachers Indicating Time Available for Planning and Collaboration in an Average Week (by School Type)



“I’ve done planning time in big schools and small schools and it can be done if you sit down and look at the schedule and have a conversation with the teachers about how to create the plan for the schedule.”
—Principal

To help address these challenges, Governor Easley signed into law House Bill 1151 in July 2006, requiring schools to develop a plan to provide at least five hours of duty-free instructional planning time per week and a daily duty-free lunch period for every teacher.² Acknowledging the difficulties in creating school schedules that incorporate sufficient non-instructional time—particularly at the elementary school level—the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Advisory Board, in collaboration with The Center for Teaching Quality, and with generous support from the Karen and Christopher Payne Family Foundation, convened a meeting of nine elementary school principals to learn how they create and protect non-instructional time for teachers. This brief is designed to document successful strategies that have helped these elementary schools meet or exceed the planning time requirements of HB 1151.

These nine schools were selected based on their teachers’ overwhelmingly positive responses to time-related items on the 2006 Teacher Working Conditions Survey. The schools were representative of the state on an array of characteristics (see Table 1). The size of the schools ranged from 123 to 756 students. Locations included small towns, as well as rural and urban areas. Free and reduced lunch rates ranged from 25 to 99 percent. Six of the nine schools were Title I school-wide. Five schools had full time specials teachers (physical education, art, music, media), while four had half time teachers in those positions.

School	District	5 hours or more*	Students	FRL	Specials Teachers	Title I Schoolwide	Location
Speas	Forsyth	23%	341	81%	Half time	X	urban
Druid Hills	Char-Meck	25%	314	93%	Half time		urban
First Flight	Dare	23%	380	25%	Full time	X	small town
Bugg	Wake	26%	426	39%	Full time		urban
Everetts	Halifax	24%	278	87%	Half time	X	rural
South Topsail	Pender	24%	679	28%	Full time		rural
Clearmont	Yancey	50%	120	58%	Full time	X	rural
Eastover	Cumberland	25%	369	43%	Full time	X	urban
Weeksville	Pasquotank	35%	295	50%	Half time	X	rural

* Percent of teachers indicating they had five hours or more of non-instructional time per week.

While the nine schools reflect a wide variety of local circumstances, a number of trends were found across schools regarding scheduling efforts that incorporate time for teachers to plan and collaborate.

LIMITED RESOURCES POSE CHALLENGES, BUT THOSE CHALLENGES ARE NOT INSURMOUNTABLE

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires schools to ensure that all students achieve high academic standards. Beyond NCLB standards, most education observers also recognize a pressing set of skills and knowledge students need to thrive in the 21st Century workforce. The competencies needed to succeed include deeper learning that moves beyond memorization of content to an emphasis on conceptual understanding, critical thinking, problem solving, and knowledge application. While the pressure increases for students and schools to meet increasingly complex standards, educators are also teaching learners with more diverse needs. In the current educational environment, scheduled planning and collaboration are not luxuries but

rather essential elements of high-quality teaching in all schools. Standards, accountability and the 21st Century workforce all demand that students perform at high levels, regardless of available resources. While it may be easier for schools with full-time specials teachers to build sufficient time into the school schedule, with careful planning, schools with fewer resources also can provide teachers with sufficient time to plan and collaborate with their colleagues.

The schools described in this brief vary in size, student demographics, and access to resources. And those differences helped create innovative solutions to provide non-instructional time for teachers that fit their school contexts. Despite different strategies for creating this time, each school demonstrates an understanding that time to plan and collaborate is an essential and necessary part of teaching and has made a strong commitment to incorporate that time into the school schedule. As one principal explained, “You do what it takes in the course of your day to make the important people in that school feel like the important people. We have to do what we can to make their job a little easier.”

“While there is no one solution that will work in every context, each of these schools followed a similar path in creating schedules that provide teachers with time for planning and collaboration. First, teachers played a key role in developing the school schedule. Second, each school assessed their needs and identified the resources available to them. And finally, the school leadership developed mechanisms for ensuring non-instructional time was used effectively.”

Speas Elementary

Speas Elementary School is too small to support full time specials teachers, so they have those teachers for only three days each week. However, due to a district commitment to foreign language instruction, the school also has half time language instructors as well as a technology teacher. These teachers provide the specials classes on the other two days. The school operates on a nine period schedule with specials included every day of the week for 40 minutes. On the three days when the PE, art, and music teachers are in the school, two of those periods are back to back. The result is that teachers have eight periods of planning time each week averaging more than an hour per day.

Druid Hills Elementary

Half time specials teachers and district mandated times for core content area instruction create challenges for Druid Hills. To create 70 minutes of planning time per day for every grade level, the school employs lunchroom monitors to provide duty-free lunch that allows grade level teachers to eat together. That duty free lunch period is backed by the state mandated physical activity period and specials classes to provide blocks of planning time. In addition to the traditional specials classes of PE, art, and music, the school created an Accelerated Reader special where a tutor provides structured time to read and conference with students, freeing up teachers to plan individually and with colleagues.

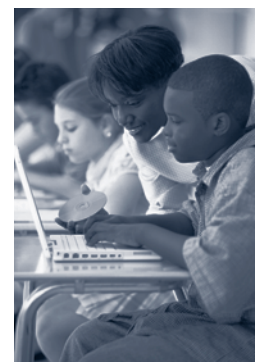
“The key is listening to teachers and having them bring plans forward. They will come up with the best plans when you have that kind of open dialogue.”
—Principal

STEPS FOR CREATING A SCHOOL SCHEDULE WITH SUFFICIENT NON-INSTRUCTIONAL TIME

1) *Involve teachers in developing the school schedule*

In each of the nine participating schools, principals pointed to the essential role that teachers have played in creating and refining the schedule. While principals use a variety of mechanisms to collect the input of teachers, they recognized teachers as the most qualified individuals to inform the development of the school schedule. One principal explained, “It’s all about listening to the teachers and the plans they bring forward because they are going to come up with the best plans available for using and creating time.”

For some schools, the School Improvement Team (SIT) was the primary mechanism for giving teachers a voice in the process of creating non-instructional time. Principals indicated that the SIT’s have helped to define and set expectations for the amount of planning time available to



teachers, including the amount of collaborative time available. One principal explained, “In our SIT, we look with teachers at the areas we want to target. We saw the need for more grade level planning and decided that all teachers need at least one hour per day of planning time.” Another principal reported that the impetus for their schedule changes and current model for planning time came directly from a young teacher presenting a new schedule to the SIT.

The results of engaging teachers in creating the school schedule have been tremendous. One administrator talked about how the teachers have created additional time without additional resources: “We have more planning time secured now than we ever had. And, it did not come through additional resources. It is simply on the good planning of teachers.”

Other principals explained how they have lightened their work load as teachers assumed responsibility for the schedules that most directly influence their work. One principal stated, “As an administrator, I don’t do any scheduling. They [teachers] sit down and work out their own schedule. We work it, and work it again, and sometimes have to work it again.”

South Topsail Elementary

At South Topsail, teachers are encouraged to attend School Improvement Team (SIT) meetings and present their ideas for improving the school. The current school schedule was presented at a SIT meeting by a young PE teacher. In accordance with her proposal, the school adopted a 4+1 block schedule that provided a 45-minute planning period for every teacher.

Speas Elementary

At Speas Elementary, the School Improvement Team (SIT) developed the schedule. Speas is smaller than the average elementary school in the state. With only 34 classroom teachers, all teachers have an opportunity to periodically serve on the SIT, thereby ensuring that the SIT represents all viewpoints and constituencies within the school.

“What teachers really want is large uninterrupted blocks of time, some sanity in their schedule so they are not pulled in so many different directions, and some planning time every day.”
—Principal

2) Assess needs and available resources

The nine participating principals stressed that schools are not alike in their needs and access to resources. Therefore, to create the most effective schedule for their schools, they identified teachers’ most pressing time needs and took inventory of the time and personnel available during the instructional day.

While the needs of teachers varied by school, as well as within schools, a common theme emerged—the desire for large blocks of uninterrupted time. A common approach for creating large blocks of time is providing a duty-free lunch backed by the physical activity period and specials classes. Schools with full-time specials teachers are often able to utilize those teachers to provide individual teacher planning time as well as collaborative time for grade level teachers. Schools with half-time specials teachers must be more creative. These schools could not rely solely on specials teachers to provide non-instructional time and duty-free lunch for teachers. They used administrators, teacher assistants, lunchroom monitors, and community members. One principal, who regularly covers classes for teachers said, “I tell the teachers that there is nothing I won’t do that I would ask you to do, inclusive of teaching classes if that’s what you need to collaborate with your colleagues.” Teacher assistants were used primarily to cover lunch and the physical activity period.

One school, Everetts Elementary, brings in members of the community to deliver content at monthly programs scheduled for students. These programs increase community involvement within the school while providing additional time for grade level teachers to collaborate.

First Flight Elementary

Unlike many other schools, First Flight Elementary approached the creation of the school schedule from the perspective of protecting instructional time, rather than from the perspective of creating non-instructional time. After ensuring that instructional time was protected, teachers were left with one hour of planning time per day and a duty-free lunch period. Teacher assistants, as well as the principal and assistant principal, cover lunch. Teachers then decide when the teacher assistants will have 30 minutes of planning time.

Weeksville Elementary

Weeksville teachers needed more grade level planning time. To create that time, specials classes were blocked to provide three days of grade level planning as well as one day of staff development with the instructional specialist. For six years, Weeksville staff have worked together to continually modify and improve the school schedule to meet teachers' needs for sufficient time to plan and collaborate.

3) Develop mechanisms to ensure non-instructional time is used effectively

A consistent theme echoed by the nine principals was the importance of the quality of non-instructional time—using that time to improve instruction and support student learning.

In one large urban district, the quality of planning time has become a more important issue for teachers than the amount of planning time available. As the principal explained, “We have a lot of planning time because of available specialists, but the question we asked is whether we were using this planning time effectively. We put teachers into groups and asked if the planning time is actually effective for helping improve student learning. We attend meetings to make sure that teachers are really talking about students during planning time. We are trying to create more meaningful dialogue among teachers about how they are working with and reaching students.”

Other principals attempt to provide more structure and guidance to teachers so that they can more effectively direct their own planning meetings. One principal said, “There needs to be some guidance on planning time ... and we (principals) need to do more to help ensure that time has value.” Yet, the principals described the challenge of bringing some structure and accountability to planning time without stifling the potential for innovative and authentic meeting time. Principals want a degree of knowledge about how teachers are using their non-instructional time but also wish to respect and honor the professionalism of teachers.

One principal said that he does not directly monitor the progress of meetings but does have an expectation for deliverables that help ensure quality. He reported, “We have two things that every teacher must do in planning: keep a notebook to keep track of what happens in meetings and follow a meeting agenda. The key to success in planning time for teachers is to be organized. We expect teachers to have their stated objectives in an agenda ... for every meeting.”

Bugg Elementary

Bugg Elementary teachers had sufficient planning time, but the concern was how they were using that time. This year, teachers meet as groups to talk about how they are using their non-instructional time. The instructional resource teacher and the principal attend these meetings as well. Specialists have their own planning time, and they meet with every grade level to plan how to integrate curriculum into specials classes.

Clearmont Elementary

To ensure the integration of grade level curriculum with specials classes, teachers are required to meet every two weeks with the media and technology coordinators to plan and collaborate to integrate curriculum into media and computer lab time. In addition, the principal has weekly meetings with computer and media coordinators to discuss how they are working with grade level teachers. The school leadership and faculty have recognized that the potential to effectively leverage resources like specials teachers hinges on requiring and monitoring integration of specials within the curriculum.

“At a school like mine, with more than 90 percent free and reduced lunch, we spend an enormous amount of time trying to create a frame of reference for students to even begin to start and sustain learning models. The time that it takes to plan effective instruction matters most. . . The planning piece is essential. It has to happen, and it has to happen in a collaborative sense.”

—Principal



DISTRICT-LEVEL ISSUES TO CONSIDER

- Allow for flexibility and foster innovation in scheduling and planning time.**
Mandates on the use of time may increase the challenge of finding sufficient non-instructional time and inhibit creativity in providing time at the school level. Schools within the same district vary in the availability of resources, access to specialists, student learning needs, community support, teacher experience and transportation schedules. Under these diverse circumstances, defining a rigid system for scheduling and planning time to apply equally in all schools proves counter-productive. Instead, districts should recognize the unique needs of individual schools and create mechanisms for sharing strategies for making effective use of time and creating unique planning time solutions. Additionally, these ideas should be promoted for schools to consider adapting to their own contexts. Districts might consider providing financial and/or non-financial incentives for schools that provide educators with additional planning time.
- Encourage principal to principal discussions that allow for open dialogue and sharing of ideas and experiences.**
While it may not be feasible to adopt the exact strategies used in another school, there is no need to completely reinvent a process. Strategies that work in one school could be modified to fit another school's particular needs and resources. Just like teachers, principals benefit from the knowledge and experience of their peers. For example, the Halifax County Principal's Association meets monthly to do just that—provide time for principals to discuss common concerns or to address particular issues they face in their own school.
- Provide guidance on expectations for the use of planning time without becoming overly prescriptive.**
Districts should find an effective balance in providing some general guidelines to ensure that planning time is used to help improve student learning, while allowing for some latitude in defining “efforts to improve student learning.” Guidance with flexibility will foster customized solutions for planning challenges facing individual schools. To the greatest extent possible, districts should also consider implementing a reporting tool for schools to describe how educators are creating and using planning time to improve student learning.
- Build in rewards for non-instructional time.**
Research shows that the most effective professional development is student-centered, school-based and built into the day-to-day work of teaching.³ This kind of professional development takes place daily in schools through the collaborative work of coaches, mentors, instructional specialists, grade level teams and other teachers. These types of professional development activities usually are not considered formal professional development where teachers receive continuing education credit for their participation. Teachers should receive credit for participating in collaborative non-instructional activities where they can demonstrate a change in teaching practice and its impact on student learning.
- Prioritize planning in the allocation of resources.**
School districts have choices in how they use dollars and staff schools. Districts need to consider not only the instructional needs of each school but the non-instructional time needs of teachers. Looking at employing paraprofessionals and specialists and strategic use of qualified substitutes and volunteers should occur. Larger districts with qualified support staff should examine how district personnel can be engaged in school settings, to the benefit of planning time as well as keeping them grounded in the each of their schools' contexts.

Districts should recognize the unique needs of individual schools and create mechanisms for sharing strategies for making effective use of time and creating unique planning time solutions.

CONCLUSION

Successfully meeting the needs of diverse learners requires significant time for educators to collaborate with colleagues, discuss and observe best practices, and participate in professional development that prepares them for the challenges of teaching in the 21st century. Unfortunately, we know that many teachers across North Carolina and the nation are not satisfied with the time they have to complete key aspects of their jobs. This dissatisfaction is driven by severe lack of non-instructional time during the school day, extremely limited opportunities for collaboration with peers, failure to engage teachers themselves in the scheduling process, inefficient use of available resources to create additional time, and few efforts to ensure quality within the context of the time that is available.

Creating additional and meaningful time for educators is tremendously challenging and important. The good news is that examples of schools that provide more quality time for educators can be found throughout the state. The experiences of the nine elementary school principals participating in this focus group indicate that finding time is difficult but can be done in any school setting where administrators and educators are committed to leveraging all available resources, engaging teachers in reviewing scheduling needs, promoting flexibility and innovation, and creating mechanisms to ensure that time is used effectively.

In North Carolina, House Bill 1151 brings much needed attention to the issue by requiring schools to develop their own plans for providing duty-free instructional planning time and duty-free lunch periods for every teacher. The Bill also allows for the flexibility of scheduling to accommodate unique school contexts.

The strategies employed to provide additional time for teachers will be as unique as the schools implementing them. While it is essential to resist the urge to become overly prescriptive in mandating scheduling plans for schools, focusing more attention on the need to provide additional time and removing barriers to creating this time are equally important.

Like many reforms in education, effective solutions to create time for teachers can be found in high-performing schools—as evidenced by the nine elementary schools in the focus group. The challenge is creating the policy context and school conditions which make the success of these nine schools the rule, rather than the exception. House Bill 1151 represents a tremendous step forward in prioritizing planning time for teachers. Much work remains for state policymakers and district administrators to create learning environments where all teachers have sufficient time to help all students learn at high levels.

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NOTES

1. Eric Hirsch and Scott Emerick, *2006 North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey Interim Report*. Submitted to Governor Mike Easley, Oct. 18, 2006.
2. “Planning Time and Duty-Free Lunch for Teachers.” House Bill 1151. Session 2005. (enacted 2006).
3. Darling-Hammond, L. (1997). *Doing What Matters Most: Investing in Quality Teaching*. New York, N.Y.: National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future; Sanders, W.L. & Rivers, J.C. (1996). *Cumulative and residual effects of teachers on future student academic achievement*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center; Rivkin, S. G., Hanushek, E.A. & Kain, J.F. (2000). *Teachers, schools, and academic achievement*. Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No. 6691.

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