Creating Genuine Readers with Flexible Scheduling

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As a presenter and speaker, one of the things I'm most often asked to talk about is flexible scheduling—or, in some cases, to avoid talking about because "it just isn't possible at (insert campus name or district name)." I know elementary school libraries; I served for one year at the Pre-K level and four years at the elementary level at two different schools. I know that mentality of "we have always done it this way, and this is the way we are going to keep doing it." What I also know is that a person with enough gumption to go in and rock the boat and change things up can fight for change and make it work!

The thing I noticed about working in a school library on a fixed schedule was that I didn't have any curriculum. Teachers in music, art, and physical education have TEKS (our state's learning standards) about what they have to teach and cover. However, in Texas there is no such thing as library curriculum. So I was busy trying to make up stuff to do with my students and present entertaining story times, but these things were not instructionally relevant. I mean, they could have been, but I had no real way of knowing because I wasn't collaborating with the classroom teachers.

I moved to another elementary school where everyone was used to a very fixed library schedule; classes came every week, and students returned their books, checked out new books, and enjoyed a library activity or story time. However, I wanted to do more to support students' learning. Over the course of three years I was able to move that campus from a very fixed schedule to a completely flexible schedule. The first year I was there, every week teachers in grades K–2 dropped their classes off for thirty-minute library times, and teachers in grades 3–5 dropped their classes off for thirty- to forty-five-minute library times.

One of the things that bothered me most about the schedule was that my precious readers were returning their books on library day every week regardless of whether they were done with their books. I watched in horror as they would yank bookmarks right out of the middle of a book and turn it in! Why?!?! You aren't done with it! Students were so involved in the routine and the excitement of getting more books that they were not behaving like genuine readers.

Genuine readers don't turn in their books just because it's library day!

I wanted to instill the habits and behaviors of readers in my students, not increase my check-in and check-out stats. Genuine readers carefully select their next books based on interest, reviews from peers, and excitement about their next choice. Readers return a book because they are done with it or because they choose to abandon it. Readers share their love of a great book with one another by describing the book and what it was they liked about it. I knew something had to change if our students were going to take ownership of their reading process.

I asked to move to a flex schedule my second year at that school but was told that it just wouldn't work. Since I wasn't going to give up that easily, I went to the second-grade team of teachers and asked them if they would be willing to do an experiment with me. I explained what I was seeing with the kids and their behaviors with books, and I explained that I wanted to nurture our readers *and* be instructionally relevant. Here's what I asked the second-grade teachers to do and not do:

1) **No more whole-class check-in and check-out.** Teachers would send their kids individually, in

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pairs, or in groups of three to come to the library and check books in and out as needed based on their reading needs for their classroom readers' workshop. This strategy allowed me to engage in actual readers' advisory with my students instead of dealing with a herd mentality: "Where are the Wimpy Kid books?"

2) **Classes would come to the library as a whole class for curriculum-related activities on which the teachers would collaborate with me.** We'd have no set schedule. Instead, we would teach a lesson when it actually fit in the curriculum timeline. If we needed to teach X on Wednesday and Thursday next week, that's when the class would come to the library—yes, two days in a row!

3) **On an as-needed basis, teachers could bring a whole class for a fifteen-minute "Book Blast" if the teacher had a significant number of students who needed to go to the library.** No class had a set day or time. Any kiddos without the need to do anything with their books wouldn't have to bring their books.

4) **I also became VERY lenient with due dates.** I began telling the kids in *all* the grades, "Your book is due when you are done

with it. If you need to abandon a book the next day because you don't like it or it's too easy or too hard, so be it. If it takes two months or two days to read your book, you return it when you're done." (To this day I do not believe in due date stamps, cards, or slips in a book.) No more pulling bookmarks out of the middle of books students weren't actually done with.

These policies took effect across an entire grade level with the whole team of teachers on board. We then proceeded to start the collaboration process. Throughout the school year we collaborated sixteen times for curriculum-related lessons. On a regular basis I would e-mail teachers, meet with them face to face, and talk to them on the phone to help them determine what pieces of their lesson plan would make the most sense to teach in the school library.

In most cases, I would take a lesson that was less than awesome and bring it to life with great books, technology, library resources, stations, and hands-on activities. I would create the activity page or the product that the students would work on throughout the course of the activity. I would gather the necessary resources and supplies. I would acquire any additional technology needed. I would make the answer key (if there was one) and provide copies to each teacher. *I did all the leg work for the lesson so that the teachers just had to show up with their students and help me co-teach the content.* I relied heavily on the teachers because of course they were the experts on their content. I would ask for their guidance and input on the activity sheet I was creating to make sure it aligned with what they were doing in the classroom and their learning targets. I also relied on them when they were with me in the

library to ensure that students with Individualized Education Plans or students with 504 plans were given all the necessary modifications and accommodations.

These library lessons became some of the most memorable experiences for the students and teachers for that year because the lessons were such shining examples of the power of collaboration and its role in enriching and enhancing the curriculum!

At the end of the year I asked those teachers and students to help me create a video about this flex schedule experience. (To watch it, go to <www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2tCbssf-JQ>.) I then went to my principal armed with this experience and the video and examples of the curriculum-related work we had done together—the teachers, the students, and myself. As a result, I was asked to present that video and examples of the lessons and student work at the back-to-school professional development days for classroom teachers. That third year, I was allowed to implement the model across grades 2–5. Bumps and other issues had to be worked through that third year. I still faced some opposition, but it was clear that this model was in the best interests of student achievement and making the library instructionally relevant.

The following year I went to a new elementary school in our district and opened a new library. The principal at that new school was 100 percent behind the flexible schedule model. I did still have kindergartners and first-graders on a somewhat "fixed" thirty-minute library visit each week—especially at the start of the school year. However, as the school year progressed, I was able to collaborate on a broader scale with kindergarten and first-grade teachers and make their library

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visits more curriculum driven. I also emphasized that we could change class "times" at any point should we need more time for a lesson or so I could see all their classes over the course of a day or two to fit in their curriculum lesson. I would also tell the classroom teachers that their "times" had to be flexible in case another grade level needed a lesson on a specific day.

Flexible scheduling is one of those things that we all know—in theory— is best for kids, but often find difficult to implement in practice. However, I encourage you to find ways to make flexible scheduling a reality at your elementary or secondary campus. After putting flexible scheduling into practice and making it a reality at more than one school, I know it can work. Implementation does take a lot of perseverance and dedication, though. Here are some tips:

- Be prepared for the need to frequently remind teachers you are there as a resource and to ask them to collaborate with you.

- As much as possible, be present in planning meetings to offer ideas and suggestions to enrich and enhance the curriculum with school library resources and your own ability to coteach.

- For scheduling, find a tool that works for you AND for your campus. I have used a variety of resources, such as Google Calendar, Outlook Calendar, my library website, Google Forms,

and e-mail as a way to track who is coming to the library when.

- Be prepared to meet the teachers at *their* point of need to accomplish the planning and collaboration (in-person meetings, e-mail, phone, text, carrier pigeon, etc.).

Implementing flexible scheduling can be a hard row to hoe, but it is so worth the effort for your school and your students! I am here as a resource, and many other librarians are out there who can also serve as resources for those of you who want

to make flexible scheduling work, but aren't sure how to do it. We are all in this together, and we are better together! Let me know if I can help! (Seriously.)

To see all of the grade-level activities I have done throughout the years, go to <http://borchardtlibrary.edublogs.org/category/grade-level-collaborative-activities>.

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Recommended Reading:

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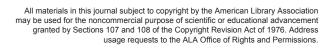
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