

a Challenge

These four schools questioned set-in-stone thinking and tested their own limits.

support struggling readers in 1st and 2nd grade, we asked teachers to provide reading assessment data, to spell out their students' areas of greatest need, and to fill out learning profiles of their students, noting which students spoke English as a second language or had disability issues. Our goal, especially early in the year, was to focus instruction to close a specific learning gap.

Canadian and U.S. schools need new strategies related to scheduling time. A U.S. government report from the National Education Commission on Time and Learning concluded that

For the past 150 years, American schools have held time constant and let learning vary. The rule, only rarely voiced, is simple: Learn what you can in the time we make available. [Some] bright, hard-working students do reasonably well. Everyone else—from the typical student to the dropout—runs into trouble.¹

The balanced calendar model challenges the status quo of an outdated agrarian "school year" and maximizes the time students spend engaged in learning. The arrangement minimizes summer learning loss and offers remediation to struggling students while shattering the boredom of summer. It puts time on the side of students. ♦

¹National Education Commission on Time and Learning. (1994). *Prisoners of time* (Rev. ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Joan Hamilton (905-457-1799; joan.hamilton@peelsb.com) is Principal, **Sheryl Johnston** is a 3rd grade teacher, and **Jane Marshall** is Acting Vice Principal at Roberta Bondar Public School, 30 Pantomine Blvd., Brampton, Ontario, Canada L6Y 5N2. **Carolyn Shields** is Head of Educational Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Letting Teachers Specialize

Sarah M. Butzin, Robin Carroll, and Bridget Lutz

Six years ago, South Heights Elementary School was the lowest-performing school in Kentucky's Henderson County School District. The state had placed the school under sanctions. A demoralized staff had many excuses. Teachers blamed poverty, lack of parent involvement, poor discipline, and high staff turnover for the situation. Few expected to meet the state goals.

Yet by 2004, South Heights was the fifth-highest-performing school in the district. How did the school do it? With leadership that embraced an instructional model called Project CHILD (Changing How Instruction for Learning is Delivered).

Project CHILD restructures how teachers manage time. Students from various designated grade levels are all taught core academic subjects by one teacher designated for that subject, and are sometimes taught in multi-age groupings. Students keep the same teacher for that subject for three years.

When a teacher works solo within a "grade," students may lose instructional time at the beginning of each year while teachers get to know them. Students also lose quality instructional time at the end of each school year after "The Test" (you know what we mean), because teachers back off from rigorous topics, knowing that students will move on to another teacher the next year. This

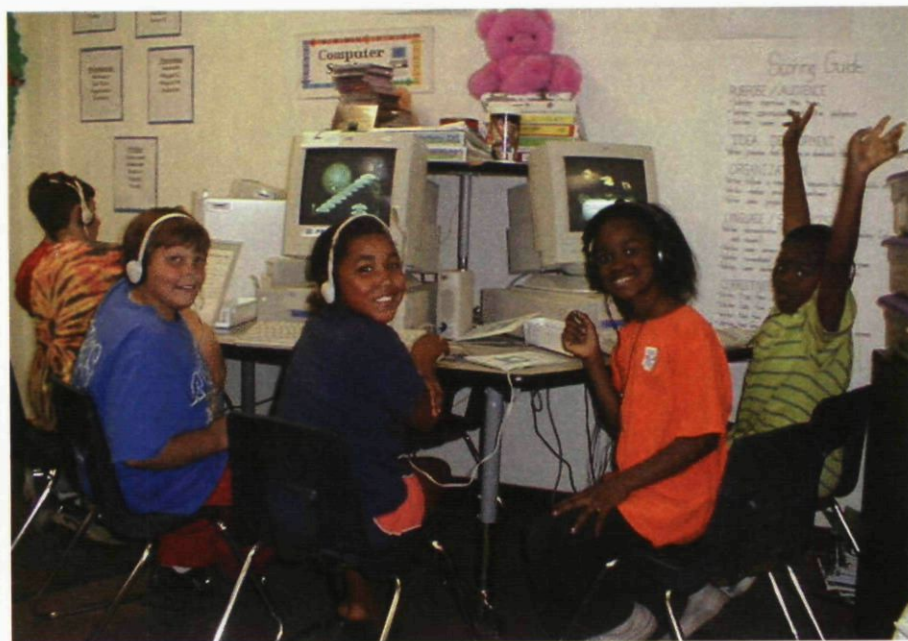


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system wastes valuable instructional time and lends itself to teacher burnout.

In 1998, the South Heights leadership team encouraged a 3rd, a 4th, and a 5th grade teacher to pilot an intermediate CHILD cluster. Rather than the homeroom teacher teaching all subjects, one teacher focused on reading, one on writing, and the third on math, teaching to all grades in the cluster. Students thus had the same teacher for these core subjects throughout 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade.

Each CHILD classroom contained a

teacher station for small-group and one-on-one tutorials, a computer station with three to six computers, a textbook station for work with the district's core programs, and three stations for hands-on discovery learning. Each classroom also featured an "exploration station" for manipulating materials, a "challenge station" with games and puzzles, and an "imagination station" for creative projects. A classroom management system, including "passports," task cards, and daily station assignment boards, kept

students focused and on task.

Students rotated among reading, writing, and math classrooms for 60-minute instructional blocks. Science and social studies were taught in the home base classroom. Most blocks began with a whole-group lesson, but follow-up activities took place at the stations. Thus, each student had multiple opportunities for computer-based and hands-on learning in reading, writing, and math.

Students could now move between stations without having to wait for the

Giving Stakeholders a Voice

Nelson Beaudoin

Imagine inviting 200 students, parents, and faculty members to attend a school program on a Thursday evening in the middle of summer. In August 2005, Kennebunk High School in Maine did just that, welcoming a broad sampling of the school community into our effort to bring more stakeholder participation into school decision making. Opening our process to the wider community led us to the fringes of our comfort zone, but resulted in community-grounded changes to our school governance.

At the time, Kennebunk had spent four years promoting student voice and pursuing school renewal. Our students enjoyed a wide range of student-led initiatives and learning experiences. Students served as representatives on the school board and on hiring committees, led parent-teacher conferences, and provided feedback to teachers.

But in spring 2005, a volunteer student task force revealed growing frustration among students. Although the school had great regard for student

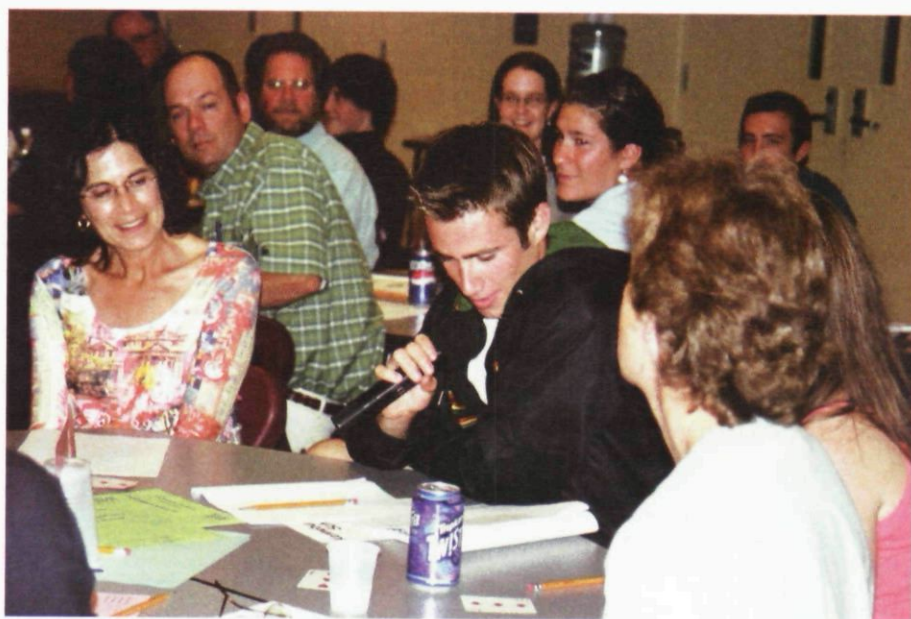


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voice, our system was still exclusive. Too many students were on the outside looking in, and most had no clearly defined path leading to involvement. We also needed policies to ensure continuation of participatory school governance beyond the good graces of the current administration.

In addition, some teachers were struggling with the concept of empowerment, and some parents had only

token involvement in school affairs. Essential questions surfaced: What role can students play in school decision making? How does a school ensure that students, faculty, and parents have an opportunity to weigh in on an issue? We took the unconventional step of calling a schoolwide meeting to help us find answers.

We called our meeting "200 People for 200 Minutes for a Better School."

whole group to finish a task, and because they enjoyed the diverse activities, time spent on task soared. Teachers tailored station activities to multiple learning styles and employed differentiated instruction. Each teacher had materials, provided through the CHILD program, that spanned all three grade levels.

At the end of the pilot year, CHILD students were outperforming the students in the self-contained classrooms. In the second year of the pilot, the 3rd–5th grade cluster teachers already knew their students when the

school year began and could hit the ground running.

By 2001, thanks to the performance of the CHILD classes, South Heights was close to achieving the academic goals set by the state. South Heights went schoolwide with Project CHILD the following year.

After five years as a Project CHILD school, South Heights Elementary has exceeded the academic goals set by the state. In 2004, the school was recognized as a National School Change Award winner. South Heights teachers

have moved beyond the single-year, single-teacher model. Their most common reaction is, “I’ll never go back.” ♦

Sarah M. Butzin is Executive Director of the Institute for School Innovation in Tallahassee, Florida; sbutzin@ifsi.org.

Robin Carroll (rcarrol@henderson.k12.ky.us) is Principal and **Bridget Lutz** (blutz@henderson.k12.ky.us) is Instructional Specialist and CHILD Coordinator at South Heights Elementary School in Henderson, Kentucky.

We were afraid no one would come or that we would fall short of 200 participants. Those fears, however, paled in comparison to the fear that we would not be able to fill the 200 minutes with meaningful activity!

But 183 people (80 students, 60 parents, and 43 teachers) came to the event. Given that we randomly invited approximately 140 students, 90 parents, and all 70 of our teachers, the turnout was phenomenal. The 200 minutes were filled with activities that promoted collaboration and inspired an emotional commitment to change.

Four major activities unfolded at the meeting:

- *Celebrating our success.* We shared data showing tremendous growth in positive school climate and student achievement at Kennebunk.

- *Exploring the change process in schools.* We tackled an exercise in decision making involving Kennebunk’s structure for reporting student progress. Although only an exercise, this illustrated how schools can improve on an already successful process.

- *Looking at group goal setting.* In mixed groups of students, parents, and teachers, we viewed the DVD accompanying Stephen Covey’s book *The 8th Habit* and looked at goal setting and working together. The accompanying

discussion reinforced the understanding that all our stakeholders had essentially the same goals.

- *Planning for empowerment.* In separate groups of parents, students, and faculty members, participants reviewed how fully they believed the school currently empowered their group. These groups generated more than 20 posters outlining ideas to improve school governance.

What role can students play in school decision making?

The process launched that night continues to unfold. For example, students organized an activity fair (heavily recommended at “200 People”), which was a great success in terms of promoting greater involvement in student activities.

Last fall, a committee of 11 students began working with the principal to propose a new governance structure for Kennebunk. They committed to developing a plan that would not only advance student voice but also benefit the entire school. After much work and

research, the committee created a tiered school governance structure. The first layer offers all stakeholders a voice in school decisions through voting on referendums, responding to surveys, or speaking at schoolwide meetings. The next layer includes the school’s main stakeholder groups: our faculty, the parent organization, and our student council (which has open membership). Finally, the school senate, an annually elected body of 8 teachers, 12 students, and 4 parents, makes final recommendations to the school administration.

In December, the student committee proposed this governance structure to the Kennebunk faculty. Two months later, 96 percent of our faculty endorsed the new structure, and in March it was introduced to parents.

This positive outcome is less significant than the fact that we opened up our change process to the community. Only from the fringes of our comfort zones can real change occur. ♦

Nelson Beaudoin is Principal of Kennebunk High School, Kennebunk, Maine; nbeaudoin@msad71.net. He is author of *Stepping Outside Your Comfort Zone: Lessons for School Leaders* (Eye on Education, 2004) and *Elevating Student Voice: How to Enhance Participation, Citizenship, and Leadership* (Eye on Education, 2005).

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