

Schools That Like

Making the Most of Time

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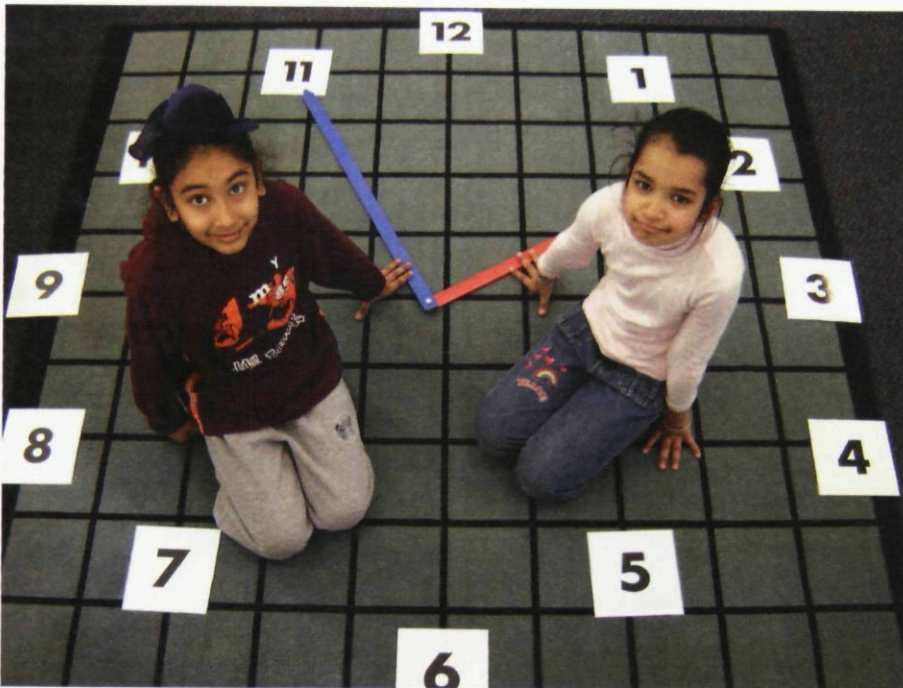


PHOTO BY JOAN HAMILTON

A long summer vacation in which students forget much of what they have learned is far from ideal for learning. At Roberta Bondar Public School, which serves K–8 students in a Toronto, Ontario, suburb, we follow what we call the balanced calendar model—essentially, year-round schooling. This schedule frees us to provide priceless instructional time and enrichment to our 1,100 students, most of whom come from first-generation immigrant families.

Roberta Bondar is one of a handful of Canadian schools using a balanced

calendar. The model generally includes an alternative school year, a modified school day, and enhanced learning opportunities during breaks. Our students do have school holidays, but these holidays are distributed throughout the year. School starts in early August, five weeks before the traditional start date of early September. The five holiday weeks gained by starting in August are spread out; we have a two-week break in October, a three-week winter break, a week in February and a two-week spring break in March. Staff members and students also enjoy the month of July off.

Beyond reducing the summer learning loss, we strive to use the time that our students spend in school in the most efficient way for learning. We have modified our school day so that two 45-minute nutrition breaks replace the traditional lunch hour and two recesses. Because students spend less time transitioning between classes, they gain instructional time. We estimate that the balanced calendar model adds four to six weeks of instructional time to the school year.

The balanced calendar model maximizes learning time.

During each break, we offer an inter-session—optional remedial and enrichment classes at an affordable price. Intersessions provide students who need additional help with extra time for learning or a chance to learn through unconventional methods. Classes include a wide range of learning opportunities, from robotics to math to cooperative games.

Roberta Bondar's teachers eagerly signed up to teach our first inter-session period last fall. Although teachers were paid additional salary for teaching during these periods, the chance to help students was as strong a motivator for our teachers as the higher pay. Before the classes began, we gathered feedback from classroom teachers to design learning opportunities that met the specific needs of the student group registered for inter-session. For example, in creating a remedial reading class to

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.

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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

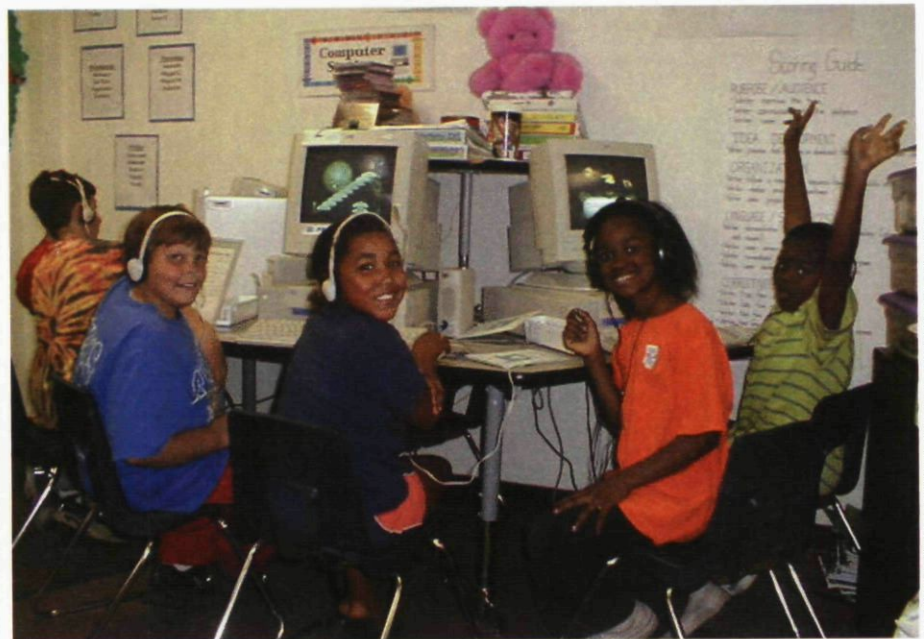


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