

Making Time in the Middle

Simply put, we needed extra time. While reviewing the data on student performance, teachers at the rural school I lead in southern Minnesota quickly realized they needed to figure out how to carve out time during an already busy instructional day to help students get the extra assistance they needed.

The Reality

Southwest Middle School in Albert Lea, Minnesota, serves 510 sixth- and seventh-graders, with each grade level split into two teams. Over the past five years, Southwest Middle School students in both grades have scored below 50 percent proficiency on math and reading state assessments. As a result, school leaders decided to develop a new way to maximize time during the school day to provide enhanced learning experiences for students.

An intervention task force comprised of administrators and teacher leaders from each of the four teams and representing all content areas began to explore ways we could make a buildingwide change. As a result, the task force created an enrichment period called TigerPlus by adjusting the master schedule and repurposing the advisory period. We created a 30-minute block of time after our second period where twice a week we could preteach, reteach, retest, give an extra boost, or extend learning for students.

Creating the time turned out to be the easy part. We spent the majority of our time making sure students were physically where we wanted them to be and determining how best to reach and teach them once we got them there.

Implementation

The implementation of TigerPlus has gone smoothly thus far. We started by sharing the work of the task force with teachers. This information consisted of the vision and purpose of TigerPlus, the proposed TigerPlus



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process and schedule, as well as areas for future staff discussions. Staff then had multiple opportunities to analyze the proposed process, ask questions, or offer suggestions for improvement, which was an important part of creating a buildingwide movement. We were ready to launch once discussions were finished and

final decisions were made.

We then practiced the new schedule for two weeks before officially starting sessions in order to give us time to work out as many of the logistical aspects as we could. These included details such as number of students per session, content priority weeks, and the process for identifying students for targeted interventions.

We agreed that during a specific content area priority week, sessions would be capped at 10-12 students to provide a smaller, more personalized learning environment. However, these smaller sessions naturally led to other teachers having larger sessions, so we also needed to have a general session where students could have quiet reading and study time.

Teachers have worked hard at providing a variety of sessions that mix preteaching, remediation, extended learning, and student choice. Our approach to the whole process continues to be a work in progress as we see more possibilities each week and continue to respond to student need.

Another important part of our implementation was ensuring that TigerPlus is a part of a buildingwide integrated system of interventions. TigerPlus is not a magic wand for all academic ills, but it will be an important tool that we will continue to expand. We are continually trying to find the balance between giving students choice and prescribing what they need. We also know that 30 extra minutes twice a week only adds one hour of bonus time each week. We would like to increase that amount.

Results and the Future

Students like the extra time they get twice a week, and we are pleasantly surprised at how easily they adjusted to the new schedule. We started by communicating to students that we all learn differently and at different speeds, and TigerPlus is a way for us to help you where you need it most.

Students have shared that they like being in smaller learning groups to

get more instruction on concepts they didn't grasp the first time around. Other students like having extra time to do their work with support available. Still, others comment that they feel more relaxed and smarter when they have a lesson taught to them ahead of time.

"I feel like I'm ahead of my classmates because I learned this information yesterday at TigerPlus. Usually I feel behind," said one sixth-grade math student.

One sixth-grader who is usually quiet during math lessons now regularly answers questions. Students looked at him in awe and asked him how he knew all the answers. The student answered, "TigerPlus."

Parents also like the idea of adjusting the schedule to give students extra learning time. As we neared the end of our task force work, we sent a letter to parents describing how TigerPlus would work. Although parent feedback has been very positive and

supportive for TigerPlus, parents are thirsty for more information about the learning occurring during the enrichment period. This is one key area that leaders and teachers will work on as the program moves forward.

One of the biggest successes with TigerPlus is teachers' ability to pre-teach concepts. This has occurred across content areas in one form or another, but has been extremely effective in our math courses. Staff also witness student confidence soaring when they get the information early.

Other staff mention an increase in students taking more ownership in their learning and constantly wondering about their own progress. They also love the time this period lends for teaching the "extras" that are hard to fit in the everyday curriculum.

One concern from staff that we will continue to monitor is the amount of time it takes for teams to manage the process. For example, teacher teams spend large amounts of time track-

ing where students on their team will spend their TigerPlus time. Collaboration and communication between teachers is vital in determining how students are placed in specific intervention sessions or qualify for required work completion sessions, or for determining whether a student can sign up for an open-choice enrichment session. We will explore a better technology solution to help streamline this process.

Next Steps

There has already been talk about expanding our TigerPlus program from two days a week to four. The staff at Southwest Middle School continue to analyze the needs of our student population, and through our PLC lens, we see many areas of opportunities for making our time with students count. ■

Steve Kovach is principal of Southwest Middle School in Albert Lea, Minnesota.

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