

Departmentalize Elementary Schools

In elementary schools today, most students receive their education in a single classroom from one teacher who is responsible for teaching language arts, social studies, math, and science.

The self-contained classroom organization is predicated on the assumption that an elementary school teacher is a Jack (or Jill)-of-all-trades who is equally strong in all areas of the elementary curriculum. Yet we know intuitively that most classroom teachers are not multi-talented, and that they have no choice but to teach in some areas where they have no fundamental interest.

One attempt to address the pitfalls of the self-contained classroom organization is through departmentalization. In this setting, teachers teach in their area of specialization and students move from one classroom to another for instruction.

Advantages of Departmentalization

Although some researchers (Bowser 1984; Findley 1966) have charged that collaboration problems exist between disciplines in departmentalized elementary schools, and that the emotional needs of students are not met, departmentalization offers the following advantages:

Specialization. Students receive basic education from teachers specialized in particular disciplines. From the teachers' perspective, instructional time is better utilized by concentrating on fewer disciplines.

Instructional teams. Grade-level instructional teams can be formed to coordinate teaching efforts across each discipline. Students benefit because they are exposed to the instructional wisdom of more than one teacher.

Teacher retention. With a more focused workload, teachers are able to complete their teaching assignments with greater satisfaction. The result is

greater stability and retention of highly qualified teachers.

Transition. Departmentalization in elementary schools aligns with middle school organization, better preparing students for transition.

Flexibility. Departmentalization allows students to move between grade levels according to ability, and from ability group to ability group within grade levels (National Education Association 1965).

For years, elementary schools using the self-contained classroom organizational structure have operated with instructional monotony and academic limitations. In recent years, however, a number of attempts have been made to revolutionize the delivery of elementary education. Innovative measures, including grade-level teams, cross-grade teams, non-graded structure, and partial departmentalization (Wiles and Bondi 2001) have been practiced with varying degrees of success and laid the groundwork for the successful implementation of full departmentalization of elementary education. For schools willing to try it, we offer these recommendations:

- Initiate a departmentalization pilot, starting with the upper grades. Limit participation to children whose parents request it.
- Be willing to try various forms of grade-level or cross-grade grouping, based on test score data and teacher recommendations, before full implementation of departmentalization.
- Analyze student test scores and conduct satisfaction surveys for all stakeholders (teachers, students, and parents) to see if there is a significant difference between the scores

and responses of those associated with the pilot groups and those associated with traditional classroom structure.

You might be surprised by the results of departmentalization. Isn't the improvement of the learning process for elementary school children worth the risk of trying it? ■

References

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- Wiles, J.; and Bondi, J. *Curriculum Development: A Guide to Practice*. (6th Ed.). Columbus, Ohio.: Merrill Prentice Hall, 2001.

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HERE'S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT

You just read a research-based argument for departmentalizing elementary school instruction. Is the traditional self-contained classroom doing the job in an era of high-stakes testing? How would departmentalization affect the principal's role as instructional leader? Let's have your thoughts and comments at www.naesp.org/speakingout/.