



Designing Schedules to Support Professional Learning Communities

PLCs need common planning, teaching, intervention, and enrichment times.

Leadership Compass » Vol. 5, No. 2, Winter 2007

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While there is broad agreement as to the importance of professional learning communities (PLCs) and the promise they have for school improvement efforts (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Dufour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004), providing support for teachers to engage in this important work is a constant struggle for school administrators. In many elementary schools the only support provided through the school schedule is common planning time. Although common planning time is essential, it is not sufficient.¹ Instead, the following features of elementary school schedules are supportive structures for PLCs:

- Common planning time;
- Common teaching time;
- Common time for intervention and enrichment;
- Special service personnel scheduled in tandem with general education colleagues; and
- Extended planning time provided for teams on an occasional basis.

Common Planning Time

At the very heart of the PLC model is the need for time for teachers who work with the same students or teach the same content to confer with each other. To provide common planning time in the school schedule, the number of encore teachers (*i.e.*, PE, music, art, and library) must at least match the number of teachers on the team for whom common planning time is desired. For example, a school with four teachers at every grade level would need four encore teachers. Although a variety of rotations of these (or other) classes could be employed, a four-day cycle as illustrated in Figure 1 would provide the needed coverage.

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4
Teacher A	Music	PE	Art	Library
Teacher B	Library	Music	PE	Art
Teacher C	Art	Library	Music	PE
Teacher D	PE	Art	Library	Music

In a typical elementary school with grades K-5, this rotation would be repeated at different times of the day for each grade level, as shown in [Figure 2](#). Notice that the master schedule is developed from eight 50-minute periods; one encore period is allocated per grade level and one period for encore teachers' planning and lunch. Grade-level common planning times are labeled "Encore/Plan."²

Common Teaching Time

To maximize instructor strengths, elementary teachers in PLCs often exchange students for basic instruction, regrouping in either language arts or mathematics, departmentalizing in a variety of formats, or through the implementation of parallel block scheduling. Creating common planning time for teachers facilitates the scheduling of these sharing arrangements as large blocks of uninterrupted time are available for the teams. Notice how all grade levels shown in [Figure 2](#) have common blocks for core instruction.

Common Time for Intervention and Enrichment

Equally central to the PLC is the creation of a system in which team teachers agree to instruct a common curriculum at a common pace with students' progress measured through a

common set of formative assessments (Rettig, McCullough, Santos, & Watson, 2004). Often, the downfall of such a plan is the absence of a practical means for providing instructional interventions and enrichment. The intervention/enrichment (I/E) periods placed into the schedule shown in [Figure 2](#), provide a structured time for these important activities. Ideally, teachers on the same grade level or team evaluate students' formative assessment results and plan appropriate intervention and enrichment activities during common planning time, and then they provide these activities by temporarily regrouping students among classes during the I/E period based upon common needs. Special service personnel, such as special education, English as a Second Language, and Title I reading and math teachers, also may work with their students during the I/E period without interrupting basic instruction.

Strategically Schedule Special Service Personnel

Key also to the success of PLCs is the careful scheduling of special service teachers. Unfortunately, many schools still resort to what we call the "When can I have your kids?" model of scheduling for special services programs. All too often, elementary school specialists build their own schedules long after the classroom teachers' schedules have been constructed. Upon receiving the list of eligible students at the start of the school year, the teachers of students with learning disabilities, English-language learners, and Title I reading students meet with each homeroom teacher to schedule contact time. The resulting schedule fragments core instructional time for both teachers and students and also inefficiently uses special service personnel. It is strongly suggest that special service personnel be scheduled as part of the master scheduling process. [Figure 2](#), shows the schedule of a special education teacher who provides inclusion services during basic instruction time and pull-out services during the I/E periods for grades 4 and 5. By foregoing one I/E period a week at each grade level, the shared special education teacher could plan with each grade level on a weekly basis.

Extended Planning Time

Although scheduling daily common planning time for teachers goes a long way to providing opportunities for discussion of formative or summative data, curriculum pacing, instructional strategies, the quality of students' work, professional development, or the next round of interventions and enrichment, school administrators must recognize that teachers need individual time for lesson planning and the assessment of students' work as well. Collaboration, no matter how important, cannot usurp all teachers' planning time. In fact, many union contracts specifically forbid called meetings during teachers' planning time.

Schools and districts often attempt to provide additional time for teachers to collaborate by scheduling work days when the students are not in school or through the use of substitute teachers. Such time also can be provided during the school day using the following two scheduling alternatives.

Create a second encore rotation. Some schools have additional personnel who could be called upon periodically to become part of a second encore rotation. Staff such as guidance counselors, librarians, technology specialists, and science, health, math, or reading specialists might serve in this capacity once a month. As illustrated in [Figure 2](#), the I/E periods in the master schedule have been placed adjacent to the encore/plan periods at every grade level. If the school were to slot this second encore rotation in place of the I/E period one day per month, every grade level would have a monthly professional development period of 100 minutes. [Figure 3](#) suggests a possible "Encore 2" rotation for our sample school. Please note that consecutive grade levels K-1, 2-3, and 4-5 have identical 100-minute blocks, which could be used to facilitate vertical teaming efforts.

	PD Day 1	PD Day 2	PD Day 3	PD Day 4
Teacher A	Computer Lab	Math Lab	Guidance	Science Lab
Teacher B	Science Lab	Computer Lab	Math Lab	Guidance
Teacher C	Guidance	Science Lab	Computer Lab	Math Lab
Teacher D	Math Lab	Guidance	Science Lab	Computer Lab

Create a ninth period for professional development time. If we were to shorten the periods shown in [Figure 2](#), from 50 to 45 minutes and take five minutes from the homeroom period, we could construct a master schedule based upon nine, 45-minute periods, giving us one additional period to allocate to professional development activities. If we placed this period next to the regularly scheduled planning period for encore teachers, we can create a 90-minute block that could be placed at either the end or the beginning of the day. On an occasional basis, each grade level could be assigned this block for professional development activities with the encore team planning in the usual planning slot for that grade level.

As stated previously in Canady and Rettig (1995) and Rettig and Canady (2000), school scheduling is far more important than the simple mechanical assignment of students to teachers, spaces, and time periods. Within the school schedule resides the power to address problems and to facilitate the successful implementation of effective instructional practices including professional learning communities.

Footnotes

¹ Because of space limitations, the ideas suggested in this article are presented without detailed discussion of the exceptions, different school day lengths, levels of staffing, etc. that impact individual schools.

² See Canady & Rettig (in press) for an in-depth discussion of the construction of encore schedules.

References

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Rettig and Robert L. Canady have written extensively on the topic of school scheduling for the past two decades; their latest book, *Designing Elementary School Master Schedules: Maximizing Resources for Student Success*, is scheduled for publication in March 2008.

On the Same Page

Here are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussion about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. What are the common features of elementary school schedules that are supportive of PLCs?
2. Why is it important to plan for common planning and teaching time?

3. How can special service personnel contribute to a PLC schedule?
4. How would we need to change the schedule at our school to facilitate a PLC?
5. How will scheduling common planning and teaching times affect student learning?