Schedule and Learning

Gelenian 2/22/18

Several people suggested that I clarify some issues and background surrounding the proposed schedule change. I started writing what I thought would be a short list of the things people told me to mention in this discussion. What follows is a more comprehensive view of the schedule and how it relates to where we've been and instruction as it has evolved and changed at RA.

1. More and more classroom instruction centers on student ideas and increasingly rigorous projects. We still have room to grow. The schedule change emphasizes the importance of collaborative planning in developing engaging, multidimensional and integrated learning experiences for students. It would be difficult to create these types of experiences within a traditional planning and classroom structure.

The schedule does a better job of giving people time to work together. Rearranging working space could increase this interaction. The issue of workspace needs to be front and center given the rather random discussions that are going on concerning closing a school in the midst of SM indicating the need for more space.

Examples from our history books

- The summer reading was our first iteration of school-wide project work. I initiated summer reading as I did to model the structure, process and qualities of decent project work. The summer reading involved:
  
  - Dynamic, engaging, rigorous, and fun collaborative planning—originally done by Keri and Michael over the summer, students began selecting their own books.
  - Group Projects
  - Connections and involvement of people outside the community
  - All-school community activities that sometimes resulted in surprising outcomes—Carmen, Gray fundraiser, documentary series.
  - Faculty participation in planning evolved through hiring subs, kick-off event began in the spring.
Think back over the experiences connected to:

1) The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind
2) Animal/ Human Interaction and Connection;
3) Survival
4) Biography/ Choose Your Own Adventure
5) Events, people, ideas that changed the world/ The Butterfly Effect;
6) Visible and invisible differences

- I designed the Summer Academy to integrate a traditional skills-oriented summer school with projects. We hired a teacher from HTH to work with Chris the first year. We showed that the approach was successful with our most difficult students given the type of support we could offer during the summer—multiple teachers working and planning together; paid time for planning; engaging activates in the PM. Multiple people have been successful teaching in the summer. We have had two very large news stories develop out of the Summer Academy work (Mt. Cube story and last year’s writing project).

- The 4th grade wagon project—Carmen & Keri/ Pompanoosic Mills field trip and collaboration/ Doug/ SKYPE with Native American cartographer/ Parents/ powerful exhibition/ FUN/ Facebook post

- Balloon Launch---Kerry & Laszlo/ $2,500 grant/ NH amateur radio/ FUN/ Facebook post/ Project card

- 9th grade Plymouth Plantation—Kirsten & Christina/ field trip to Plymouth/ Excellent CEs/ well-attended exhibition/ FUN/ Facebook post

- Silk Road—Jenny & Doug/ excellent, interactive exhibition/ FUN/ Facebook video

- NAFTA, the game— Paige & Gail, 3-D printer support help from Laszlo/FUN/ Facebook post

- Bathroom murals— Jenny & local muralist/ field trip to Dartmouth/ PUBLIC/ FUN/ Facebook post
Cell project—Rachel & Gary/ Cotton Cancer Center/ doctors/ survivors of genetically based diseases/ well attended exhibition/ videos on Facebook page

Interview fiction—Eric & Story/ many community members/ great press/ Facebook post

Dragon fly project—Rachel/ Dartmouth/ student trip to Dartmouth and presentation/ engaging, lasting display documenting student thinking

Quebec bike trip—Kirsten & Story planning and teaching/ bikers assembly/ $4,000 grant/ excellent newspaper article/ participation from multiple staff/ community donations of bikes

Macbeth play—Jen Bottom & Northern Stage directors and staff & 7/8 team/ performed at a packed Northern Stage evening performance with FULL student participation.

Staff produced community directory—COL PD group/ involved all staff in learning/ Board presentation and support/ Jen, Gordon and others have used the people they visited

All of these examples involved teamwork, collaborative planning, and creativity. The examples often involved community participation, extra funding generously provided, and exhibitions.

In terms of student learning these examples fostered learning and engagement though multiple modalities, fostered teamwork (often modeled by students seeing teachers working together), emphasized reading, writing and speaking, intense problem solving, and real world applications.

Very often these projects attracted the attention of our surrounding community to RA.

I use these examples to attract more students to the Academy—meetings with principals, choice night presentations. Materials from the work described above are used in our CE/ Project cards.
Imagine if I showed up to a choice night with stacks of student tests, essays, and math problems. Imagine if students only had tests, essays, and math problems to put in a portfolio.

The work described above sets us apart. We need to do more of it. As the examples show, the work requires teamwork. I started it, supported it through years of professional development, personal collaboration with teachers, trips to HTH, support through the Rowland Foundation and now it is being supported by the board with extra funding for supplies and materials.

My prediction is that we will increasingly be losing students to Hartford because of their excellent programing. If RB improves their programing the same will happen. This issue has been part of my planning from year 1. I have a chart that I made and presented in October 2010 that addresses this issue.

I hope that we lose more students to CCV, Early College, and VTC. Our goal should be to create a robust 9-11 program that launches kids their senior year. This is good news.

Our goal must be to help students find out what they are good at doing so they can do more of it. The key word is DO/ action/ world changing/ self-changing. Literacy is not enough. Literacy has changed to include video, photographs, audio, and technology.

2. There is a teacher equity issue. We have uneven teaching loads and much staff talent is not being fully utilized in creative ways. Eric’s classes are packed, and he’s giving a lot of personal feedback on written work.

The equity issue also affects instruction, teacher motivation, and student learning. I have done several evaluations over the years in classes with 3 or 4 students. I saw a significantly diminished learning environment, especially when the students were seniors.

These issues and the schedule:
The schedule change maximizes our talents and attention to kids in 9th and 10th grade. The focus on projects and Critical Exploration
supports along with the reducing the class size—2 teachers with half the class in humanities and X-block helps keep the work fun and engaging. It gives kids more attention and mixes things up. Anyone in 9-12 can take any x-block class when it makes sense. We have 9th graders who could pass the English class at CCV.

The schedule puts two teachers in the writing heavy humanities blocks with approximately 20 students in each class. Story, Brynne, and our new digital person will be added to the second 9/11 humanities blocks, giving us two teachers in these double block classes. SEA’s will be free to be assigned elsewhere. This will take us a step further in integrating special education.

It is true that Kirsten, Carol, and Eric are the lead teachers in these blocks but the expectation is that the other teachers must share part of the teaching load and grading load, especially with written work.

Anna has a legitimate complaint about doing the play after school and starting the day at 7:30. I’m not sure what to do about that at the moment.

3. Creativity is stifled while working alone. (Most poets and writers commune with other poets and writers and editors etc.). Besides project/CE—learning that cut across multiple modalities and disciplines and personal experiences—most school classrooms tend to operate within a limited range of learning modalities. We need more art, drama, music, movement, technology, construction, and cultural perspectives in math, science, English and social studies.

The reason that Rachel’s dragonfly posters are so attractive is because of the size, layout, photography, color, and graphics. Look at winter carnival posters. True, there are key artists that do the build of the design work. Students whose main contribution is laying down
paint learn along the way by watching, talking, and laying down paint.

4. Time and projects tend to focus on the humanities because of the double block and multiple teachers. What’s up with that?

This is true, but vertical teams at each grade with two blocks of planning will allow for work in a science class or math class to link to a project in humanities. BUT the link should go beyond content knowledge or some theme. Better-- a more concrete connection where students in science are making something that is part of the humanities project. We saw this in the HTH documentary, where the engineering students had to build contraptions that displayed students’ theories of why civilizations rise and fall based on their examination of seven different civilizations. On the flip side, if students are studying why things fly in science it would be weak to have students writing poetry about flight.

What about math? We can draw from HTH’s experience that math needs to stand alone. That is not to say that there couldn’t be connections or that math teachers don’t need to connect math to the world.

Social studies teachers are worried about teaching writing and English teachers are worried about teaching social studies. I am not worried about this. I am worried about other things.

As it stands we are not doing enough low stakes writing in all classes that is meaningful and receives quick feedback. Students need to rewrite. We also need to do more targeted intervention on literacy. It’s time to spend our unused Title I funds and hire someone!
Last spring, I talked to Eric and Jen B. about bringing in a friend of mine, an excellent writing teacher, to work with them on planning and presenting ongoing workshops on writing.

5. The common planning time builds in two opportunities for 2-3 people from each team to discuss student issues and plan an advisory activity each week.

In effect the common planning blocks and teaming build in advisory/EST/morning meeting/class meeting into the structure of the day. The 30-minute block provides grade level teams flexibility in addressing the needs of students from academic to social. People wanted flexibility in advisory. Here it is. Pick the day. Pick the activity. Make it real, useful, and meaningful. It also gives the team flexibility in who might want to address a particular issue. Who is going to meet with the 9th graders to discuss their sexually charged language that is beginning to tilt toward harassment?

Our interventions are currently ad hoc. I decided that 2 eight graders would be more successful doing things other than music at the end of the day and moved them out. It was worked out magnificently for the kids. Story and I combined forces to put together a writing group for several weak 9th graders. Some kids have advocated for themselves to Nancy to be moved out of the lower Algebra class. These sorts of changes and ideas are not happening because people don’t feel responsible for a particular group of kids DESPITE all our work on advisory. EST happens and nothing happens!

Our history book

- Advisory wasn’t working when I came here, and I eliminated it. Neither students nor staff made a fuss.
- Silas, student advisory council, Mary, and Jenny redesigned advisory. The work was driven by the need to build a more cohesive school culture, develop soft skills among our students, and address the state PLP requirement. Much of this work came off of the Choose Your Own
Adventure day. It is good work—documented, accessible and flexible despite everyone’s claim that, “They can’t change anything.”

➢ There was a structure (Jenny with advisory oversight, a curriculum, advisory leaders, advisory team leader meetings and staff development time devoted each month to advisory planning) and much trepidation.

➢ Morning meeting has been a success among people who structure morning meeting. (I suggest that anyone interested should visit a 5th and 6th grade morning meeting to understand the full extent of structuring morning meeting.)

➢ The complaints about advisory are louder than supporting comments. Yet, I would not want to lose what we have fought hard to gain. There is MUCH more in place than when I came.

Keri’s history book and the issue of creating a cohesive, supporting school culture:

➢ I worked with 3 teachers to launch a new school. We began with approximately 75 9th graders. The humanities teachers taught both classes and I taught 1 day per week.

➢ The ability to focus on one group of students enabled us to create an incredible school community. When we added the 10th graders we combined them with the 9th grade in order to maintain a singular focus on all the kids. Creating report cards was a communal process. We discussed each student’s performance in every class together. We have nothing close to this at the moment.

➢ We could combine 9th and 10th.

➢ I keep in touch with the teachers at the school. Their video page shows that the school culture has remained very strong. Click though the videos.

https://www.youtube.com/user/academyoftheredwoods/feed?feature=context-cha

6. If you want to get ahead, get a theory.

“In theory,” I hear people say. In other words the schedule is a theory. Sure, but the things that I have spelled out above are not. Anyway, nothing is wrong with theory. It has driven human change since the beginning of time. Animals have theories. Some monkey
had a theory that a stick could be used to get ants out of an anthill. Smart monkey.

7. Already done it.
I hear people say that we are just copying HTH’s schedule. Nope. We already have HTH’s schedule. We’ve had it for years. What HTH has is a different utilization of space. There are two teachers that share the same office. Their classes are adjacent to one another. They collaborate by the design of their school in terms of space and requirement.

This schedule takes collaboration a step further because we are not HTH.

8. It all boils down to COMMITMENT, WILL, and SUPPORT.
   ➢ You have a principal who loves to teach—would rather teach and who works with teachers on projects and planning.
   ➢ We have worked with two sets of education organizations and people who have international reputations. We still have these relationships.
   ➢ The board has provided us with additional funds to more ahead with projects.
   ➢ We have the space.
   ➢ We have the talent to move to the next level in our work.

It all boils down to commitment and will.

My suggestion is that Story, Kerry, Kirsten, and Carol stay back from PD on Thursday or even take the full day and work on a schedule. This document and the document on Instruction that I passed out last week spell out what we need to accomplish. We need a structure to do. Take a whack at it.