

Daily Demand Modular Flexible Scheduling for Small Schools

JAMES W. STEWART
JACK SHANK

THE J. H. Ames School, a laboratory school at Wisconsin State University in River Falls, completes a third year of use of hand-designed modular scheduling this year. Planning and implementation of this mode of education involved 100 students, grades six through nine. Instructional resources and building facilities available during this period could be considered adequate to superior, but were largely traditional in nature and quite similar to small well-equipped public schools.

Modular scheduling is now not at all uncommon in larger junior and senior high schools which use computer assistance to facilitate this particular administrative instructional innovation. However, the staff of the laboratory school at River Falls believes it has now demonstrated that small schools, unable to afford computer services, can successfully avail themselves of the instructional advantages in flexible modular scheduling.

Finding that visitors to the school pose similar questions about the transition from traditional scheduling to modular scheduling, the staff compiled responses to certain questions which are frequently asked. These questions are the following:

• *What are the primary advantages in the adoption of flexible modular scheduling, as seen by the teachers of a smaller school?*

A great deal of lip service is paid to the practice of individualized instruction. Unfortunately, this goal is seldom, if ever,

reached under most educational systems. Far too frequently, schools using modular scheduling are no more successful than others in developing true individualization of instruction, in that their unstated goals are primarily those of administrative convenience plus economy in use of teaching staff and crowded facilities.

The modular schedule at J. H. Ames School was developed, refined, and continually evaluated by the instructional faculty with the sole purpose of improvement of teaching and, thereby, the learning experiences of students. The staff sought more meaningful interaction among the students, a variety of media, and a physical facility. New instructional vistas were desired within the personal relationships between students and teachers, at a given moment in time, free of most administrative restraints, particularly the concepts of the necessity of five class meetings per week and the sanctity of a class hour. Once these needs were met, three primary advantages were found:

1. Adoption of the large group, small group, independent study patterns of modular scheduling absolutely demanded a complete rethinking and reorganization of instructional methods. The door was finally opened to innovation of new techniques now identified by current educational research. Every staff member had to become a "new" teacher. The immediate nature of the required change brought frustrations, but also a new enthusiasm which was soon caught by the students.

2. Freedom to manipulate time blocks,

grouping procedures, and management devices for lengthened independent study periods immediately indicated the necessity for a complete alteration of the construct of instructional materials. Traditional textbooks, workbooks, lectures, units, media presentation, and assignments simply did not adequately function as before.

The staff soon found that the glorious instructional freedoms so long desired brought with them the responsibility to rework and re-design from the ground up. Materials cannot be purchased that do the job. Teachers must decide what the objectives are, what reconstructed materials will do the job, and what new evaluation techniques will serve to measure success.

3. Today, it is evident that students are seeking meaningful participation in the decision-making process and learning experiences that are provided by the school. This is particularly evident in high schools and colleges. What is not realized is that junior high and grade school students feel the same concern and need for involvement with their educational experience. These students simply have not yet organized to express their feelings. One of the goals given high precedence at Ames was to shift responsibility for learning to the students under the new system. In part, the modular scheduling practice requires new levels of student involvement. Vital to the accomplishment of this transition on a broad scale is a commonality of approach to instructional patterns, discipline, and general climate management on the part of the faculty. This desirable condition was achieved only by constant and frequent communication and rapport among the faculty. Students became known through the eyes of all the adults with whom they came in contact. Consistency and, therefore, fairness and honesty in teacher-student relationships were greatly increased. Student response to the change was markedly apparent as the teacher model changed.

• *Why do you place such emphasis on the advantages of hand scheduling? Does not a computer save time for both administrators and teachers?*

Large school systems justify the use of computers because of the complexity of courses and the variety of student programs. While J. H. Ames School is small in physical size and number of students, the curriculum is comparable to that of larger schools, offer-

ing students a wide range of elective choices. After initial difficulties of mechanics were overcome, hand scheduling of the Ames curriculum proved to be no major problem. Because the teachers, not the administrator, constructed the program, a high incentive was present to produce a system that satisfied teacher-known instructional needs.

The schedule quickly evolved from a schedule for a semester's use to a schedule for a week's use. Recently, the staff designed and implemented a daily demand modular schedule making it possible to revise the instructional time needs every 24 hours (see Table 1). Nothing less can truly be called a flexible modular schedule. The staff feels the daily demand procedure is a major breakthrough to the essence of individualized instruction.

Explanation of Schedule Requests

Every school has "inflexible" demands on the student's time. Part-time or specialty area teachers, often shared with other schools or grade levels, must be scheduled into a fixed hour for a fixed duration. Inflexible areas not listed in Table 1 are physical education, art, music, industrial arts, and home economics. The flexible core areas are listed.

To ensure the sanctity of independent study time, blocks of time were deducted from "Total Time Available" prior to establishment of the minutes available for demand (see Table 2). Recognizing the variables in age and maturity, independent study time is scaled from 20 percent for the sixth grade to 33 percent for the ninth grade.

At the close of each day, core area in-

	Schedule Requests			
	Sixth	Seventh	Eighth	Ninth
Science	_____	_____	_____	_____
English	_____	_____	_____	_____
Social Science	_____	_____	_____	_____
Mathematics	_____	_____	_____	_____
Speech	_____	_____	_____	_____
Comments:	_____			

Table 1. Daily Demand Modular Schedule, J. H. Ames School (Spring)

	Sixth	Seventh	Eighth	Ninth												
Monday	135	180	150	150												
Tuesday	165	150	150	150												
Wednesday	240	210	150	150												
Thursday	195	120	120	135												
Friday	180	165	210	180												
* * * * *																
0	1	3	4	6	7	9	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	
	5	0	5	0	5	0	0	2	3	5	6	8	9	1	2	4
							5	0	5	0	5	0	5	0	5	0

Table 2. Total Time Available (Minutes)

structors analyze the coming day's instructional needs and patterns, balance this need with the total time available, and demand the result as in Table 2. A coordinator selected from the core area staff meshes the demands into the master schedule, posting the result on a color-coded bulletin board in a central location.

Occasional needs for unusually large time blocks for such activities as science experiments, guest speakers, or large group experiences require negotiation sessions among core area teachers. Advance planning readily resolves most conflicts.

Immediate desirable outcomes of the daily demand are apparent in options to combine grade levels for large group presentations, reservation of time blocks for small group activities, and concrete stipulations for teacher-student conferences.

• *You mentioned that traditional materials do not work for instruction in a flexible modular system. Has your staff solved this problem?*

This has proved to be the most difficult assignment for the faculty at Ames. As was mentioned earlier, such new materials as are necessary cannot be purchased. The staff has had to rearrange and reconstruct materials already at hand. The bulk of new instructional resources has been designed by the teachers to fill emerging needs. In some instances, students have assembled their own learning media, using parts of textbooks, library resources, and segments of audio-visual resources. The net result has little resemblance to traditional daily assignments or the well-known unit. The only term that

applies is beginning to appear in the literature as the "instructional package."

Packages come in all shapes and sizes; they are tailored by the individual teacher for the individual student. As such, they are rarely transferable from teacher to teacher or from school to school. The temptation to borrow or to lean on someone else's ideas and devices is just so removed. The literature on modular scheduling calls the teacher-designed package a "depth package," a student-designed package a "quest package."

A key factor in both the depth and quest packages is provision for test-out, suggested time progress data throughout the package, guaranteed teacher conferences at critical progress points based on what is known about the individual student, and evaluation instruments within and at the close of the package.

It cannot be overemphasized that package construction is a time-consuming and arduous task for the teaching faculty. Pre-planning of this procedure is crucial to modular scheduling innovation.

• *What have been your problems with large groups, small groups, and particularly with the large blocks of time for independent study?*

Teachers and parents were concerned about student abuse of increased independent study time. Knowing that the designers of modular scheduling insist that about one-third of the school day must be free for independent study in order to facilitate the goals of increased student responsibility for directing their own learning, and noting the requirement for very frequent student-teacher conferences, the staff at Ames worked hard to achieve the maximum time allotment for this type of study. The faculty feels that the success achieved to date is due to two factors. First, no effort or time was spared in sharing with students the objectives and proper procedures for independent study. Every staff member endeavored to assist each student in planning his school day; when failure occurred, it was viewed as a breakdown in communication rather than a situation for discipline.

Second, it is important to reemphasize

that the teaching packages must include time progress recommendations and conference dates. Students have found this guideline help, within the packages, invaluable in plotting their daily activities. Some students require a planning period of time, replacing the old concept of homerooms, as a necessary crutch. It should be admitted at this juncture that from 10 to 15 percent of a school's student population are incapable of assuming the self-responsibility for independent study time. These students should have all of their time plotted into supervised instructional activities.

While independent study problems cause the bulk of visible mechanical and behavioral difficulties in a school entering modular scheduling, misuse of small group instruction presents a far more fundamental problem. At Ames, and at schools visited by faculty members in trips throughout the country, it has been found that small group instruction far too often is merely regular class instruction with a small group of students. Common practice ranges from teacher domination to student-led confusion. The faculty at Ames is currently attempting to break new ground in this area by experimentation with as many as 12 identified group dynamics methods, each one suited for a different instructional goal. Little has been taught in teacher education institutions about this method of instruction, but the area is replete with exciting possibilities for teaching student leadership and democratic ideals.

Large group instruction has presented the fewest problems. It is important to choose an area of content that lends itself to economical instruction in a large group setting. Films, guest speakers, broad area introductions, and faculty panels are but a few of the resources that may help in working with large groups.

- *Have you found that traditional evaluations are suitable for your program? What is your reporting system?*

Traditional letter or number grades seem to be on the way out. Teacher comments have been tried, but they have been found to be misleading and subject to mis-

interpretation. Parent conferences are necessary, but the climate during a conference is often too emotionally charged to bring about real communication. Ames School seems to be moving toward a report which indicates skill accomplishments on the part of the student. It is not a matter of grade; it is a device to report mastery in a given area and a readiness to progress to an identified and logical advanced area.

- *What do you see as the next step in your program? Where do you go from here?*

Intensive work is being done to search out more concrete data on small group instruction. At least two new reporting plans are in the process of development. Identification of behavioral objectives and the skills they require is no easy task, particularly in the areas of science and social studies.

Beyond these innovations, the Ames staff is most anxious to break the grade level label. As the flexible modular schedule progresses in sophistication and time duration at Ames, the staff observes that continuous progress and ungradedness are ideas almost within their grasp. Continuous progress will permit a 12-month school enabling teachers and students to take leave or vacations during any time block of the year. Last, there is growing consensus among the staff that the modular plan is suitable for use at the lower elementary level in a modified form yet to be explored. Departmentalization and a team approach in grades three through five are already established and successful instructional patterns.

We have reached a point at which both students and faculty must be given space, time, and the opportunity for planning learning experience options. The options, along with the administrative support that makes them feasible, must be cooperatively designed and developed in order to achieve the desirable goals of individualized learning experiences for students.

—JAMES W. STEWART, Assistant Professor of Education, Wisconsin State University, River Falls; and JACK SHANK, Director, J. H. Ames Laboratory School, Wisconsin State University, River Falls.

Copyright © 1971 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.