

Individualization in a Modular Schedule

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POPE John Central High School opened in Elgin, Nebraska, in September 1967, with 200 students, twelve full-time and two part-time faculty members, and two full-time administrators. Now in its fifth year of operation, this four-year comprehensive high school has earned full accreditation and has gained a reputation as one of the most innovative secondary schools in the state. To do this, the approach of modular scheduling leading to ever increasing individualization of instruction was chosen. Here teachers respect students and students regard teachers as friends. Here administrators and faculty listen to students, and students, in turn, freely communicate their views and desires. Classes are informal and students enjoy considerable personal freedom and individual attention. In short, education is an enjoyable, relevant, and cooperative undertaking.

Visitors to the school frequently puzzle at the maturity and responsible attitude of the students and at the trust which the faculty places in them. They wonder how such programs came to be and how other schools might initiate similar activities. The answer lies in leadership, conviction, and determination—leadership that provides a milieu which fosters the concept that education can be improved, and a determination to foster

change despite numerous odds which are common to many small rural communities.

Pope John had a student body and faculty of limited size. Many of these freshmen had come from disadvantaged educational backgrounds, having attended one-room rural schools with inadequate facilities. Nearly half of the students represented the first generation in high school and almost all of them had virtually no experiences outside their farming and ranching communities. Libraries and similar cultural and educational resources are practically nonexistent, since the nearest major city is 150 miles distant.

Fortunately planners of the school did not raise questions of optimum school size or community limitations. They accepted the input conditions as they existed and proceeded to build the program from there. The development was an evolutionary one which included some bad judgments among the good. Yet each new experience led to still further experimentation and growth, and this attitude of continual development is today the most outstanding characteristic of Pope John Central High School.

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Community Understanding and Support

Initially, educating both the school and community to the methods and goals of modular scheduling was the top priority. Several members of the staff with some experience and knowledge of the system led the program of intrafaculty learning. An intensive three-day preschool faculty workshop included a series of seven films featuring Dwight W. Allen devoted to the many aspects of modular scheduling. Throughout the year, monthly faculty meetings focused on new understandings of the educational system as they evolved. Also, several faculty members were provided with opportunities to travel and participate in workshops and seminars, which were subsequently shared with the entire staff.

Education of parents was the second order of activity, with evening programs devoted not just to explanations of the system and its rationale, but also to the opportunity for parents to experience a simulation of their child's schedule. Orientation days for students followed a similar pattern, including the dry run of the schedule prior to the first day of classes.

Classes that first year were characterized by a fairly regular pattern of large and small group meetings, the most common distribution per week being one two-mod (40 minute) large group and three two-mod small groups per class. In general, teachers tended to use the scheduled large group quite regularly, primarily for the purpose of lecture by the teacher. Small group discussions and activities were more varied, although teachers later identified the small group as one phase of the system demanding drastic changes in teacher and student roles, and consequently subject to slower evolutionary development.

Independent Study

Independent study initially was employed primarily as a released time or unscheduled time activity directly related to course work. An honor pass system was introduced whereby qualified students were allowed to use any available classroom or

laboratory during their unscheduled time. All other students spent their unscheduled time in a supervised study hall.

The latter two aspects of the system, the improvement of small group experiences and the enlargement of the independent study program, were quick to present themselves as paramount needs. By the opening of the second academic year the faculty had identified these, together with the need to initiate and execute a school-wide self-study, as priority year-long considerations.

The first of the efforts, the improvement of small group processes, was seen to evolve throughout the year as teachers developed flexibility and grew in their ability to transfer class control to the students. While most classes continued to be scheduled on a pattern of large and small groups, small group activities varied much more, and teachers frequently suspended small groups in lieu of other types of student activity.

As individualized and independent study spread to courses and students, faculty members encouraged an emergence of the student not merely as a participant, but as a determiner of school programs. Students assumed the major responsibility for planning school assemblies and developed a supplementary educational and general interest film series. This series was available to any student during his unscheduled time. Naturally, as students became more involved in active learning, faculty and administrators strengthened their insistence on student participation in evaluating and planning programs, although initially such student involvement remained largely on informal or departmental levels. Together students and teachers were instrumental in bringing to the school resource persons from many fields, including those of atomic energy and space science. Field trips and attendance at workshops and seminars increased in frequency as the young people became involved in activities which extended beyond the limited environment of their local community.

By the third year, individualized learning was the principal aim of the school. As a consequence, seven resource centers to serve humanities, mathematics, science, art,

home economics, business education, and industrial arts were established. Students with unscheduled time could work in any of the resource centers or the library without special permission. Group study in the resource centers was permitted and encouraged, and faculty members were present in their respective department centers as resource persons for the students. In addition, an unsupervised room was reserved for self-initiated, silent, individual student study.

With this stronger emphasis on independent study came a notable change in faculty attitude toward the function of large and small group activities. Large group activities especially reflected this shift; although still scheduled on a regular weekly basis, large groups met only when they were purposeful. Within small groups, flexibility also increased to allow considerable informal subgroupings or regroupings where, for example, students might be required to attend a small group but could be free to select and schedule their own groups or to change group membership.

Faculty-Student Planning

By this point in their development, the instructional staff recognized a need for a major step in designing and initiating educational innovations. Thus, they voted to cancel all classes for one week of faculty-student intensive planning. Considerable student participation in the endeavor was assumed to be an inseparable part of the program, and students were invited to participate on a voluntary basis in general faculty meetings, in departmental activities, and in communicating the results to parents and others.

School officials estimated that two-thirds of the student body was actively involved in some phase of the week's activity. Together teachers and students discussed lectures and course materials; planned units in mathematics, poetry, science, furniture arranging, morality, insurance, African culture, and more; wrote learning activity packages and constructed tests; typed, duplicated, and stapled; talked together and met each other. Many of the week's outcomes were significant

in their long range effects; many began trends which the school plans to develop and extend in the future. Not only did students participate in curriculum planning and evaluation committees, but representatives also were given voice on the superintendent's advisory board.

The successes of all these efforts resulted in the planning of a series of "floating days" for the current year. These days, held every two weeks, replace regular classes with a wide variety of field trips, seminars, independent study days, and teacher-student planning and evaluation days. Topics proposed for these days include politics, black studies, war, higher education, fine arts, business careers, minority groups, science and technology, world cultures, interpersonal relations, and others. The special days are planned jointly by students and faculty and also involve speakers, films, or other resources.

Measures of the success and difficulties encountered at Pope John have been primarily informal evaluations. This is due to the lack of personnel with the ability, the resources, and the time to conduct extensive research, although the school staff recognizes the value and desirability of assessment. Faculty members, administrators, and students have suggested, however, that the primary reason for the growth and development has been human creativity on the part of all three of these groups.

In the face of growing dissatisfaction with traditional school practices and an increasing demand for total individualization of instructional objectives, activities, and evaluations to meet the personal needs, interests, and abilities of each student, a radical departure from past modes of education is necessary. The modular or flexible schedule can be a first significant step toward achieving such individualization. Modular scheduling is itself only a tool, and as such it is only as potent as its user. Properly implemented, however, it demands a radically new style of education which gives promise of producing qualitatively different outcomes for each individual. □

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