

When Students Choose and Use Independent Study Time

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Students develop confidence and poise through a Detroit middle school's built-in plan for decision making.

THE Region Seven Middle School has included in its organization several opportunities for *student choice of curriculum areas of learning*. Our staff feels strongly that students of grades 5 through 8 need experiences in making decisions. In today's world our young students are already making many decisions outside of school—and very serious decisions. These grades are no longer part of childhood in the "old" sense. Therefore, they need to learn to make decisions they will stand by; they need to feel they *can* make such decisions and that people will respect their choices. This confidence and poise will help them throughout their lives. Thus, we consider decision making an *essential skill* in "today's school."

There are many ways to give children opportunities for decision making. We have incorporated such opportunities in our organization. We have: set IST (Independent Study Time) each week, schoolwide IST

every Wednesday, and for our final session, student choice of a total plan of work.

To explain these terms:

Set IST. We have four *sets* of teachers, with four teachers in each set. Our students work with each set of teachers for *sessions* of eight weeks. Each set of teachers allows anywhere from two periods to ten periods a week for *Set IST*. Students, on the days that have IST for the set, use conference time to sign up for the one or two classes they wish to work in for the IST. They may choose rooms: to finish work, to enjoy a project they have started and want to continue, to work with the teacher on some part of the unit, or just because they like the class. Let us remember—if it's fun we can still learn! Signing up for IST does take time in the conference period, but students and staff members feel that the time is well worth it. At the end of conference, teachers exchange lists of students signing for the different rooms. In one set, all four conferences meet in the large cafeteria and the students move from teacher to teacher in signing up on the *Set IST* days.

Is there any teacher guidance? Certainly. Four teachers working with their set

of about 125 students know them well, and can encourage and suggest wise choices for the students if it is necessary. In practice, our staff has found that 98 percent make wise choices and return to classes for help and to finish work on their own. Students *can* be trusted to want to learn if they feel it is *their* responsibility. The one or two who do not respond to independent choices would need strong guidance in any organization. Staff members, parents, and students strongly feel IST is a learning experience for students.

Schoolwide IST. To prepare our students for a choice of their total curriculum in our final session (described later), our staff initiated a half-day schoolwide IST. It proved so successful and so interesting to teachers and students that it was extended to

a full-day experience. Now every Wednesday our students report to classes they choose—two morning classes and two afternoon classes. They may choose any curriculum area in the school. This gives them the opportunity to work with teachers or in the curriculum areas they especially like, even when that room is not part of their working set. (As noted previously, every eight weeks our students move to another set of teachers—in this way they work with all of our teachers for eight weeks, one set at a time.) With schoolwide IST they can maintain a year-long activity if they wish to, and some do. Other students prefer a change of interest.

How do students sign up and what do teachers offer? These are the steps followed:

1. It was decided to do this in terms of



Photos courtesy of the author

Students are encouraged to balance their choices between classes they simply enjoy and classes that also sharpen their basic skills.

two weeks at a time, so when teachers and students sign up they are signing up for a two-week IST.

2. Two weeks ahead, teachers sign for all four periods indicating topics they will offer. Students look these over. They also may work on independent projects in a room rather than on what the teacher offers.

3. One week ahead students sign up in their conference rooms for their four periods. Only two students from each conference room may sign with a particular class each period unless the teacher gives an OK for more in his or her class.

4. By Friday of the week before the school-wide IST starts, each conference room sends the student sign-up set to the office. There students cut the sheet and staple all the choices of the same classes together—so that the names of all who choose each class would be stapled together. These final lists are given to the teacher to check attendance in the room at a certain time.

Final Session. This session offers students a chance to plan their complete week's schedule. Our first year we had the session for two weeks and everyone found it so stimulating we extended this to four weeks the second year.

The organization for our final session requires time, but the personal interaction of staff and students, and the opportunity for students to make the decisions and changes of original plans, seem to make it essential. Efficiency might lead to shorter ways but the education and encouragement of opportunities for student experiences prompt us to continue this type of organization.

One to two months ahead teachers think through their curriculum and the type of interesting activities which would extend student growth in their curricular area. They think back to the unit and activities students enjoyed or requested. Thus teachers project their plans of work. We have found it best to schedule for Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, or Tuesday and Thursday each period of the day. We have two morning periods and two afternoon periods. A few teachers need a longer time than a period to do some of their activities, so we have established

that Tuesday and Thursday could be double periods; this means students would have four periods a week that way. They could have two long sessions to complete longer activities such as food preparation and out-of-school science trips.

Do teachers ever have a chance to work with students especially skilled or especially needing help? Yes—our staff has established some "closed" classes. These classes are closed except to students invited by the teacher to participate in them. Examples of these closed classes are: Research Skills by our Media teacher for our very able students, Glee Club, Basic Math for those who need strengthening, and Advanced Algebra for eighth graders who are able students. The students may take advantage of these invitations, or if there is a conflict of interest when the closed class is offered, it is left to the student to decide to accept or not. Again, in developing this session students are encouraged to think about their decisions, to balance their choices so they will have classes they enjoy, classes which will help them in their coming years, classes that will bring them help in basic skills, as well as classes that are fun.

It is reassuring to discover how intelligently fifth through eighth graders can do this and, as they do it, it is a joy to see their pride and their poise in being able to do a good job. This is also true for our very able students, our average students, and those who need much basic work. This development serves young people of all levels of ability.

Once teachers have made *their* plans of work, copies of the 18 plans are run off and posted in each room and the cafeteria. Students have about a week to look them over. After a schoolwide assembly to explain our final session, to discuss how to make choices, and to answer questions they have, students begin to make their individual plans of work, a form for which is provided.

Every conference room has some way to number everybody's sheet 1 to 30, then all sheets are sent to the *verification room*. The verification room is any available room in the building where we can verify all these plans



Independent study provides time to finish work, to continue projects, or to obtain help in difficult subjects.

of work. All staff members free, including the administrators, media center personnel, and career consultants, work with the students.

To ensure fairness and that it is a matter of luck as to which students have the first chance to have their plans of work verified, a number is drawn, and the students from each conference room whose plan has that number come for verification. When they have had their plans of work okayed another number is drawn and more students report to the verification room. No favoritism is shown and students can and do accept this well.

To verify the plans of work it is necessary to move around the room and sign students on the class sheets for each class the teacher is offering. When a class has 24 to 28 sign up, that class is closed. Thus the later numbers drawn find some of their classes

closed and must make second and even third choices. By having the students work with the staff, they continue to make the final decisions about their classes. This process takes three weeks since it cannot be done continuously but only as several of the staff members have time to do it. When it is done the class sheets are given to the teachers along with the final plan of work for their conference class. We make a carbon copy so the office can keep a file of these choices too.

Thus, with Set IST, Schoolwide IST on Wednesdays, and the Final Session, we provide continuing opportunities for experiences in decision making for *their* life for all of our students. This approach means much work but students, parents, staff members, and administrators evaluate it as worthwhile for practical education in today's school!

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