FLEXIBLE SCHEDULING PROJECT: PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

I. The following is a list of FLEXIBLE SCHEDULING PROJECT PRINCIPLES that were culled from the various flexible scheduling reports done for the Jim Joseph Foundation Flexible Scheduling project. What was the impact of each of these on the way in which your school implemented or attempted to implement some form of change as well as the results of that change?

II. In addition to the above, please indicate how you feel about the importance of each principle:

Very Important; Important; Not Very Important; Unimportant

FLEXIBLE SCHEDULING PRINCIPLES

1. The more that the process is a product of all of the constituencies who will be affected, the more powerful will be the changes that occur in the institution.

It was our opinion that the main constituencies affected would be the students and faculty. (Parents never questioned the decision since the form of block scheduling which we selected was not a radical departure from the status quo.) While students were not involved in the initial decision to move to a flexible schedule, their opinion on the impact of flexible scheduling has been solicited along the way. For several years at CESJDS, there was a very limited flexible schedule which provided for double periods of Jewish History and of Chemistry in Grade 10. This was expanded during the 1997-1998 school year to encompass all 10th grade general studies classes. Each of these classes met four times each week – once for a two-period block. In an informal survey of student opinion, it was determined that they loved the block because it was a stress reducer; they had one fewer class to prepare for each day. They sensed that their teachers, too, were less stressed during the longer periods, and that they accomplished more in the long period than they would in two short ones. They were pleased to have an extended opportunity to ask questions, and to work on difficult material in class before having to tackle it at home.

In 1996, Dean Roz Landy first met with Bob Vogel to discuss the possibility of CESJDS adopting a more flexible schedule. At that time, I believe that she was convinced of the wisdom of this course of action, but certainly realized that this is not something she could implement by fiat. Thus, in the Fall of 1997, when a new Upper School administration took over, the staff was organized into action research committees, one of which was charged with the task of investigating the feasibility of CESJDS adopting a block schedule, and specifically which type of block would seem to work best for us. At the same time, the 10th grade general studies classes were taught in a modified block, as noted above.

In the Fall of 1998, the faculty met in small discussion groups to listen to the report of the block scheduling committee and to assess the pros and cons of three types of block schedules which were presented to us. Based on faculty input, the administration decided to implement a three day rotating block with six one-hour periods per day. A group of teachers were trained to reconfigure lesson plans in accordance with core concepts and problem solving. During the Spring of 1999, the faculty received further instruction, and the block was implemented in the Fall of 1999 for the 1999-2000 school year.

I feel this principle is very important.
2. A move towards flexible scheduling cannot happen without extensive and on-going professional development in a variety of instructional strategies that are based upon the latest cognitive research on how children learn, not how teachers teach.

As noted above, the faculty of The Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School received formal training in a few different ways. A group of 20 studied with Robert Vogel and Preston Feden prior to the start of the 1998 school year. Many felt that the most valuable portion of that experience was the collaborative lesson planning based on the learning we had done for the first two days. This experience was helpful in enabling teachers to plan their lessons in the 60 minute block, and in encouraging collaboration amongst colleagues.

We felt that it would be important to provide additional training in the real nuts and bolts of teaching in the block, so in the Spring of 1999, we engaged another consultant, Elliot Merenbloom, to speak to our teachers as a group, and then within individual departments. We had hoped that he would deal with issues such as planned movement, dividing the class session into segments with different activities (the number of such segments consistent with the age of the student), etc. For a variety of reasons this did not work out as well as we had desired.

During this past school year, we did not hire any outside consultants. Rather, we allowed faculty to collaborate, mostly within departments, on their successes and frustrations with the new 60-minute class periods, and to strategize on how to best deal with it. Our most successful staff development program, held in March 2000, was led by CESJDS teachers, who had attended workshops and conferences and who shared what they had learned with their colleagues. Teachers self-selected the session they wished to attend. Examples of the topics covered that day included dealing with special needs students, middle school issues, tips and techniques for enlivening lessons, and using technology more extensively in the classroom.

I feel this principle is very important:

3. Flexible scheduling necessitates a change in assessment techniques.

It both necessitates a change in assessment techniques and also makes a change easier to achieve. At CESJDS, we permit students to have a total of 2 major assignments on any given day, or five in any given calendar week (Mon-Fri.) With classes meeting fewer than five days a week, the time to give traditional test-type assessments is limited, and it has made it more difficult to schedule them. However, the extended time/class gives the opportunity to use other types of assessments, such as the products of hands-on activities (posters, brochures, and other projects), group reports, debates, mock trials, etc. Teachers are doing this, and many are reporting that they are finding the increased workload brought about by using the variety of assessments unmanageable.

I feel this principle is important.

4. The move to flexible scheduling has been motivated by a desire to lessen the pressure and frenetic pace engendered in Jewish Day Schools by the desire to teach a wide variety of general studies and Jewish Studies and to integrate both.

The primary reason for the CESJDS move to flexible scheduling was to reduce the pressure experienced by both teachers and students who had to prepare for 9 classes each day. At this writing, it is unclear whether or not the switch has had this effect. As a scientist, I am aware that
our “experiment” in flexible scheduling is completely flawed, since it was just one of two MAJOR changes our school community experienced this year. In addition to modifying the schedule, we moved to a new facility. While this new building is very beautiful and affords us “luxuries” we did not have in the old space (such as a cafeteria which provides meals five days a week, an expanded library, a ceramics studio, additional laboratory space…), the move itself was quite stressful. Teachers had been told that they would have about a week just to unpack. Construction delays compressed that time to a day. Many of the finishing touches were being completed by the construction crew during the first few months of school, so certain key spaces (such as the gym) could not be used. Even at the end of the year, students expressed the opinion that the new building still did not “feel like home” to them, and they therefore still feel somewhat displaced. The stress levels appeared to be very high this year, and it is difficult to determine how much the change to the 60-minute rotating block is responsible for those, and how much the move to the new facility is responsible. It was expected that teachers would experience more stress, and they reconfigured their curriculum and individual lessons, but the increased stress on students was an unpleasant surprise.

I feel this principle is very important.

5. A particular challenge for Jewish Day Schools is to coordinate the complexity of time, personnel, space and resources to be consistent with the mission of the school.

While I definitely find this principle to be true, I believe that it applies to all schools, and is not a unique concern of Jewish Day Schools. What is unique to most Jewish day schools is the necessity of a dual Hebrew/English curriculum to meet the mission of the school. Since Hebrew is one of two foreign languages studied by many of our students, each student has two classes which, theoretically, should be meeting daily, rather than just one.

(Your answer here)

I feel this principle is important.

6. Schools must develop a means to evaluate the efficacy of the move to flexible scheduling.

While I feel that this is a very important principle, I also feel a sense of frustration because I am not sure how to do this evaluation. Since we have only had the new schedule for one year, and we lost several days of school to construction delays and snow days, it is too early for a formal evaluation. We have done informal polls of faculty and students, which are discussed in the narrative portion of this questionnaire.

7. Given the special nature of Jewish Day Schools, it will be particularly important for faculties to be given the time and incentive to develop new teaching/learning materials to use with flexible scheduling.

(Your answer here)

Again, this would be important for all schools, but Jewish Day Schools give us special opportunities and challenges. The opportunity exists to link Judaic and general studies in a variety of areas. The challenge comes from the fact that most teachers have 2-3 preps. Teachers who have limited time find it difficult to be innovative 2-3 times over.

I feel this principle is very important.
8. Flexible scheduling provides the opportunity for integrated studies inter and intra disciplinary. Support is needed to help this occur effectively in Jewish Day Schools. (Your answer here)

As noted above, I think that this is an opportunity for Jewish day schools, and is especially important on the middle school level.

I feel this principle is important.

9. In flexible scheduling, all content areas in Jewish and general studies have their own particular and unique needs.

The disciplines which seem to feel most adversely affected by the flexible schedule at CESJDS are foreign language and, to some extent, math. These areas do have their own unique needs, but I think that there are needs which all disciplines share – the need to determine how to best divide the extended class periods so that there are a variety of activities to hold student attention, the need to reconfigure the curricula around core concepts, and the need to find alternative means of assessment. I feel this principle is important.

10. The enormous complexity, diversity and range of the student population that is now the norm in Jewish Day Schools makes flexible scheduling options an important area of investigation.

The student population at CESJDS is extremely diverse both in terms of ability and in terms of religious affiliation. To the extent that flexible scheduling encourages and mandates a variety of student activities, it permits more student learning styles to be addressed.

I feel this principle is very important.

11. In developing and instituting various forms of flexible scheduling, there will be a broad variety of impediments and pressures.

Many of these have been noted above. There are some teachers who are resistant to the change, but the largest problem at CESJDS is that insufficient resources (time and money) have been allocated to making the change as smooth as it could be.

I feel this principle important.

III. Using the following seven guiding questions please type a 2-3-page overview of your experience with the change to flexible scheduling. In formulating your response, please consider it as a guide for someone who is being introduced to flexible scheduling.

1. What process did your school use to address the issues of flexible scheduling?

2. What worked at your school? What didn’t?

3. If you had the opportunity to begin again, what would you do differently?

4. Are there any other issues that you faced that are not addressed by the eleven principles?

5. What impact did the “givens” (size, grade levels, religious orientation, physical facilities, etc.) of your school have on the consideration or implementation of flexible scheduling?
6. What advice would you give to other Jewish Day Schools seeking to begin the process of examining scheduling change?

7. What would you have liked to have known before you entered into the flexible scheduling process?

   The Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School is a K-12 community non-denominational school located in the Washington DC suburbs. The school is divided into a Lower School (Grades K-6) and an Upper School (7-12) each with its own administration and, as of September 1999, each with its own campus. Upper School students take nine classes each semester – 4 general studies, 3 Judaic, and 2 electives. Prior to the start of this school year, all nine classes met each day for periods of approximately 40 minutes each. Students and faculty felt a great deal of pressure to prepare for nine classes each day, and to complete the work of each class period in 40 minutes. For several years, during the 1980s and early 1990s, the only exception was in Grade 10, where there was a very modified block. Jewish History and Chemistry classes each met only four days a week, and had a double class period one of those days. This accommodated the Jewish History department’s need for a lengthier class period in which to show films and engage speakers, and for the Science Department’s need to have adequate lab time. It was clear that the stress level was high and that something needed to be done to alleviate it. Switching to a more flexible schedule seemed to be one way to deal with the problem, and in 1996, our dean, Roz Landy, first met with Dr. Robert Vogel to discuss the possibility of CESJDS adopting a more flexible schedule.

   Following this meeting, two members of the faculty attended a Flexible Scheduling conference, and taught the faculty as a whole what they had learned about core concepts, problem-based learning, and specifically the 4MAT method of lesson planning. Subsequently CESJDS has had representation at several other Flexible Scheduling conferences. During this time, staff development initiatives at CESJDS revolved around designing lessons using the Myers-Briggs approach to learning styles. In the Fall of 1997 there was a change in administration of the Upper School, and the staff was organized into action research committees. One of these was charged with the task of investigating the feasibility of CESJDS adopting a block schedule, and specifically which type of block would seem to work best for us. It was hoped that by involving teachers in the research into flexible scheduling, the administration would get the information and faculty support it needed to adopt a changed schedule.

   Using the findings of Akiba Hebrew Academy’s committee as a foundation, the Block Scheduling Committee looked into a variety of different models of flexible scheduling. At the same time, the 10th grade general studies classes were taught in a modified block, similar to the one utilized by the Jewish History and Chemistry classes in prior years. In an informal survey of 10th grade students, it was determined that they loved the block because it was a stress reducer; they had one fewer class to prepare for each day. They sensed that their teachers, too, were less pressured during the longer periods, and that they accomplished more in the long period than they would in two short ones. They were pleased to have an extended opportunity to ask questions, and to work on difficult material in class before having to tackle it at home.

   In the Fall of 1998, the faculty met in small discussion groups to listen to the report of the block scheduling committee and to assess the pros and cons of three types of block schedules which were presented to us. (A rotating block in which the 9 courses were taught over a three-day period, an adaptation of the 4x4 model in which each course would be taught for 2 of 3 trimesters during the
school year, and a modified block which would allow for four 40 minute classes and two 75 minute classes each day.) Based on faculty input, the administration decided to implement the first suggestion.

In order for teachers to prepare for “teaching in the block,” prior to the start of the 1998-1999 school year, a group of 20 studied with Drs. Robert Vogel and Preston Feden. Many felt that the most valuable portion of that experience was the collaborative lesson planning. This experience stimulated the faculty to think of planning their lessons in the 60-minute block, and it encouraged collaboration amongst colleagues. Although, in theory, those who were trained by Drs. Vogel and Feden were to teach their colleagues, this only happened to a limited extent due to time constraints. The faculty (through the Block Scheduling Committee and Staff Development Committee) indicated that it felt that it needed additional training in the real nuts and bolts of teaching 60-minute periods with gaps between them. During the Spring of 1999, we engaged another consultant, Elliot Merenbloom, to speak to our teachers as a group, and then within individual departments. We had hoped that he would deal with issues such as planned movement, dividing the class session into segments with different activities (the number of such segments consistent with the age of the student), etc. For a variety of reasons this did not work out as well as we had desired.

As a final preparation, two days in May, 1999 were set aside for 60 minute class sessions. Students in each grade (selected by random sampling) were asked to evaluate their experiences during those two days, and a summary of their comments and suggestions was given to the faculty. September 1999 we started the school year in our new building and with our new schedule. You will note one omission from this summary of the process of adopting the block schedule: parent involvement. This was deemed to be an administrative decision. Once it was made, The Board of Directors and parents were informed, but, to the best of my knowledge, their input was not sought in the decision-making process, and this may have been an error for reasons to be explained later.

There was much to adjust to as the 1999-2000 school year began. For the first time in our history space constraints mandated that we must have two lunch periods, and a schedule had to be written to accommodate that situation. (For the 2000-2001 school year, it is possible that we will need three.) As noted above, we moved to a new, vastly improved facility, however the move itself was quite stressful. Teachers had been told that they would have about a week just to unpack. Construction delays compressed that time to a day. Many of the finishing touches were being completed by the construction crew during the first few months of school, so certain key spaces (such as the gym) could not be used. Even at the end of the year, students expressed the opinion that the new building still did not “feel like home” to them, and they therefore still feel somewhat displaced. The stress levels appeared to be very high this year, and it is difficult to determine how much of the responsibility for this should be apportioned to the 60 minute rotating block and how much to the move to the new facility. It was expected that teachers would experience more stress, as they reconfigured their curriculum and individual lessons, but the increased stress on students was an unpleasant surprise. In a survey of teachers and students conducted by the school newspaper, much of this stress was attributed to teachers increasing the homework load on “off nights,” and on the difficulty of maintaining focus for one hour in some classes. It was deemed that the electives, English, and science classes made the best use of the hour-long classes, and the Hebrew and Jewish History classes the worst. Students felt that instruction in those subjects had not been changed to accommodate the longer class periods.
As the school year drew to a close, teachers met to discuss proposed schedule changes for next year. The question of whether to include more “D days” (days when all classes meet in 40 minute sessions) was discussed and soundly rejected. Those in favor included the Romance Language teachers and some members of the Math Department who still feel that the gap between classes is extremely deleterious to effective learning in their subjects. When we initiated the 3-day rotating block, we determined that if school were ever cancelled due to weather conditions, we would shift the schedule so if, for example, an A day were missed, we would return to an A day. This has met with mixed success. School was closed for a hurricane alert during the first week of classes, and from then on, it has felt, as one teacher said like we have been on “temporal quicksand.” Each time school closed carefully drawn calendars had to be revised, speakers had to be shifted (and sometimes lost) and teachers who planned out-of-school appointments to coincide with free periods either had to cancel them or plan a lesson which could be handled effectively by a substitute. It is unclear whether this will be changed for the next school year since there is a fear that if a class misses a planned test on a day when school is closed, the opportunity to take that exam may be put off for several days.

If I were beginning this process again, I would follow the advice I would give to other Jewish Day Schools. I would co-opt lay support (specifically Board support) early in the process and receive a commitment to provide the extra time and money needed to fully train for teaching “in the block.” With that additional time and money, I would be sure that the entire staff was fully trained in learning theory, and in the very practical aspects of running hour-long classes with multi-day breaks between them. I would also be sure to include a component on alternative means of assessment. Many teachers have complained because they are giving students more in-class paper-and-pencil tasks, and they are finding it extremely difficult to keep up with the grading. I might also investigate the feasibility of a different type of block schedule, which would permit language classes (and perhaps math) to meet daily. This objective would have been met by one of the alternatives, which was proposed to us by our Block Scheduling Committee, but was rejected by the faculty. I would definitely involve the faculty in all aspects of planning and decision-making, and I feel that we were successful in that regard. I would also have had some more fixed timetables for preparing to teach in the block, trying it and evaluating it. As of this writing, all of our evaluations have been informal ones. It is too early to do a formal evaluation of the effects of the schedule change, and I am not sure how such a formal evaluation should be conducted. I would have, and would still, enjoy some training in program evaluation.