

“Platooning” Instruction

Districts weigh pros and cons of departmentalizing elementary schools

By LUCY HOOD

To platoon or not to platoon? That's the question facing Irving Hamer, Deputy Superintendent of Academic Operations, Technology and Innovation for the Memphis City Schools. This year for the first time, the state's achievement test, known as TCAP (Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program), will include algebraic concepts on the fifth-grade test. Hamer says Memphis “is bracing for a very heavy downturn in student performance on the exams.”

Hamer's office has taken a close look at the district's 351 fifth-grade teachers and found that not one majored in math. “So what that means to the teaching of algebra at grade five is [that] it will most certainly be done by people who don't have extensive math preparation,” he says. That doesn't mean they won't be able to teach what's required, he says, but “the thinking on the part of this administration is that maybe one way to get higher-order math in the fifth grade would be to departmentalize the fifth grade and to make sure the math is being taught by the most able math teachers in a fifth-grade configuration.”

Hamer's not alone in his thinking. In the Denver Public Schools—where departmentalizing is called *platooning*—elementary students as young as six change classrooms, sharing teachers who specialize in only one, two, or three subjects. In the School District of Palm Beach County, departmentalization became a mandate this year for all elementary schools in grades three through five.

In districts across the country, there has also been a noticeable increase in the number of elementary schools that have adopted some form of departmentalization on their own, educators say. Education consultant Steve Peha has noticed the difference. When he began working with schools 15 years ago, presenting workshops in reading, writing, math, assessment, and test preparation at all grade levels, roughly 5 percent of the elementary schools where he worked departmentalized instruction. Now, he says, “it's more of a normal thing,” and the percentage is closer to 20 percent. “It will continue to grow,” he predicts, “as the need for high scores in tested grades and subjects increases.”

Breaking from Tradition

Platooning (or departmentalization) is nothing new. It's what middle and high schools have been doing for ages—divvying up instruction according to subject area, with students rotating to different rooms headed up by different teachers for different subjects. What is new is applying that idea to elementary schools, long the bastion of a one-teacher-per-classroom model.

Elementary school teachers are trained to be generalists who spend the entire year with one group of about 25 kids and teach them the gamut of subjects—math, science, social studies, and language arts. The conventional wisdom has been that younger students benefit from the stability and continuity provided by having the same teacher every day all day for the whole year. “In the hierarchy of priorities, keeping the kids together with one teacher is way up there,” comments Molly McCloskey, managing director of the Whole Child Programs at the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. “Focusing on the relationships is way up there,” she says. “The more we focus on that as a critical variable in every decision we make, the more we are thinking through the eyes of the children.”

Some educators also say the traditional model allows the generalist teacher to more easily make connections between subjects using a single theme, such as ancient Egypt. “The danger of departmentalization is the creation of silos,” says Katherine Boles, senior lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. “We have to teach [students] to be critical thinkers across subject areas and [to think] deeply about American history and the connection to literacy and science, instead of isolating it and platooning.”

While testing pressures may be driving the trend to bring platooning to the lower grades, advocates say it has benefits that go beyond simply delivering content by creating more opportunities for teachers to collaborate with adults and to share their enthusiasm for favorite subjects with students (see sidebar “Teachers Talk about Platooning in Denver”). **Teachers Talk about Platooning in Denver**

In Denver, where platooning has been in place on a school-by-school basis for at least nine years, educators say the benefits go beyond increasing test scores, giving teachers the opportunity to collaborate on curriculum and student progress and to share their passions for a subject.

At Denver’s Slavens Elementary School, for example, most grade levels have two teachers. One teaches language arts and another teaches math, science, and social studies. For continuity, all teachers use the same workshop format for reading, math, and science. The main drawback—each teacher has 50 students instead of 25.

That doesn’t bother Michelle DuMoulin, a first-grade math, science, and social studies teacher. “I know them as mathematicians and scientists—all 50 of them,” she says. When students stream into her room, “it’s almost like they are more excited and rejuvenated. The entire room exudes what subject you’re teaching, and I think that’s really cool for kids,” she says, adding, “I feel the theme that ties us together is the thinking and metacognitive strategies we are using to teach kids to be thinkers and to delve deep into units.”

Going back to the traditional generalist model would be very difficult, says DuMoulin. “I am so passionate about math and science. When you have the kids all day, you can extend reading and writing all day if you need to, but sometimes science and math—especially science—go by the wayside. [Now] I don’t feel like I’m skimping on everything. I feel good about it every day.”

Second-grade language arts teacher Barb Smith, who “lives and breathes” reading and writing, says she and her math/science partner have set joint expectations for basic writing in both their rooms.

At parent-teacher conference time, it’s nice to have a partner, too, Smith notes. “When you are sitting there with a parent who has hard news to hear, you have someone to back you up. When you have another teacher say, ‘I see it in the afternoon class, too,’ that helps.”

Parents at Slavens, a relatively affluent school, have also become strong supporters of departmentalized instruction. In fact, only four families signed up when the school had to open a traditional classroom headed by a sole teacher due to a bulge in enrollment in first grade.

The research on the effectiveness of departmentalizing, however, is not clear. “In no area do we have solid research that would tell us that the use of something called a ‘specialist’ improves kids’ learning—at least in part because the notion of what a specialist is can vary so much,” says Deborah Ball, dean of the School of Education at the University of Michigan and a member of the National Mathematics Advisory Panel. Nevertheless, Ball calls the idea “promising.” In 2008, the panel recommended that researchers look into the effectiveness of using specialists, or departmentalized instruction, to teach math, she notes.

“We have a large-scale teacher education problem in this country,” says Ball. When standards are raised, it’s not just the students who are affected; teachers must also acquire new skills in order to teach to those standards, she says.

Departmentalizing is a cost-neutral way of upgrading instruction because no additional teachers need to be hired and professional development can instead be focused on fewer teachers, she adds.

Maximizing Resources

A thousand miles south of Memphis, in Palm Beach County, Fla., Chief Academic Officer Jeffrey Hernandez has adopted departmentalization with gusto. Hernandez, who has a very successful track record for turning around failing schools, also has a history of departmentalizing instruction by subject area at the elementary level.

As principal of Lakeview Elementary School in Miami, Hernandez platooned instruction in all grades, and he credits the change with helping the school go from a D to an A on the state's school rating system. "We had a lot of brand-new teachers, and we needed to develop their content expertise," he explains.

Three years later when he became a regional administrator in Dade County, Hernandez departmentalized instruction in about 40 elementary schools, and student performance on the state standardized test improved dramatically. Now, as the person in charge of curriculum for all of Palm Beach County, he's taking departmentalization to an even larger scale—to third- through fifth-grade students in nearly all of the district's 107 elementary schools.

"It doesn't mean it's a silver bullet," he says. "It's an ingredient. It allows you to provide targeted professional development, and it allows teachers to become an expert in the field they are teaching . . . It's an issue of maximizing available resources to ensure teacher effectiveness."

The first two months after implementation are challenging, and there's often a great deal of resistance from teachers, he comments, but once it's put in place and teachers get to know all of their students and grow accustomed to collaborating with their colleagues, they don't want to return to the traditional format. "They kill you in the process," he says, "and they kill you if you put it back."

Hernandez disputes many of the concerns raised by those who say departmentalization is not appropriate for young children. The students adapt quite well, he points out—better than the adults. Changing both teachers and classrooms does not give rise to behavior problems, he says, and students have an opportunity to reap the benefits of more than one teaching style (see sidebar "Special Benefits for Special Ed"). **Special Benefits for Special Ed**

Platooning may have special benefits for special education students. At Elbridge Gale Elementary School in Palm Beach County, which has departmentalized instruction for grades K–5, principal Gail Pasterczyk has noticed a difference.

It can become tedious, she says, for students to spend the entire day with the same teacher in the same classroom. Departmentalization breaks the monotony: it provides students with an opportunity to be challenged by different teachers and different classroom environments, and as students go from class to class, it gives them a chance to move around without getting into trouble.

This is particularly helpful for special education students. It gives them a positive reason for movement, she notes. In addition, each classroom is set up for a single subject, which is less distracting for them, and the teamwork that departmentalization requires helps teachers better meet the needs of students with special needs.

"When we have a challenging student," Pasterczyk says, "I love having a team doing the problem solving and sharing what works. One teacher will say, 'I found something that works with his destructibility. If I do this and I do this, it works.' The other two teachers will say, 'That's great.' [Those two teachers] may have never thought of that on their own." It also prevents teachers from extending lessons in certain subjects, while scrimping on others.

Raychellet Williamson, principal of Georgia Avenue Elementary School in Memphis, has had a similar, positive experience. Georgia Avenue is a high-poverty, high-minority school where third- and fourth-grade test scores have lagged for years. The fifth grade, however, was departmentalized when Williamson arrived, and test scores were high, so this year she extended departmentalized instruction to the third and fourth grades. Each group of students has three teachers. In the fourth grade, for example, one teaches writing and grammar. Another teaches reading and social studies, and another teaches math and science.

"For our school and our intense needs and our need to make significant growth spurts with our students," she says, "I knew my teachers had to be able to focus. They have significant strides they must make . . . and I think they can do a better job by focusing on one or two subjects, as opposed to five."

Weighing the Pros and Cons

School leaders in Memphis have not yet reached a decision about districtwide platooning. They know it would be a radical shift, and they're well aware of the potential pros and cons. And, for the time being, there is no plan to expand departmentalization beyond a few schools that are going forward on their own. "The complexities are not insignificant," Hamer says. Standards are increasing at the elementary level, not only in math, but also in science, which was put on the back burner for years while educators focused on the demands of standardized tests in math and language arts. Science, however, is now being tested as well, so elementary school teachers who have not taught science on a serious or in-depth level for years must now bring it back to the classroom.

"If you are going to pay attention to the requirements of success on a high-stakes exam," Hamer comments, "then one of the things you might be doing is getting specialized content instruction." And there's nothing to say that platooning is not the way to go. "I've been looking around," he says, "and I'd love to see some solid evidence that someone has studied what departmentalization has done to elementary schools. I don't know where [that evidence] is."

Lucy Hood is a freelance education writer based in Raleigh, NC.

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