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CASE STUDY

Prepared to Pivot During the Pandemic

Creating Scheduling Scenarios at Phoenixville Area School District (PA)

by Craig Gibbons, Richard Viard, Hallie Ventling, and Kathleen Choi

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Prepared to Pivot During the Pandemic

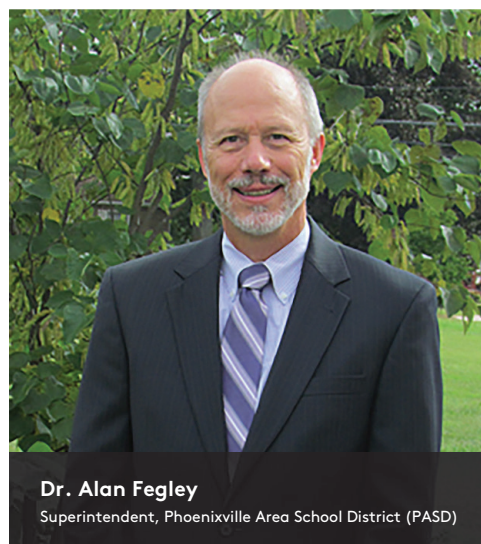
Creating Scheduling Scenarios at Phoenixville Area School District (PA)

Craig Gibbons, Richard Viard, Hallie Ventling, and Kathleen Choi

When schools were ordered closed effective March 16, 2020, Dr. Alan Fegley, superintendent of Phoenixville Area School District (PASD) and a longtime member of District Management Council, already had contracted to use DMGroup's scheduling software to create elementary schedules for the upcoming academic year. He had decided to try DMGroup's software, DMSchedules, as it promised to make scheduling easier for staff, allow staff to easily share schedules among themselves, improve use of student and staff time, and allow better visibility into the implementation of instructional guidelines.

But over the summer, in the face of growing uncertainty nationwide about how to reopen schools in the fall, Dr. Fegley's decision to try DMSchedules seemed like a prescient move. Given the power of the software, DMSchedules could help create schedules for a variety of scenarios quickly and easily. In the spring, the PASD team had focused on creating schedules for in-person instruction for the upcoming academic year. By mid-July, anticipating the need for a hybrid plan, the team explored a variety of hybrid models. When PASD announced in early August that school would start on a fully remote basis, the team was already very comfortable working with the DMSchedules software and quickly began creating schedules for remote learning.

Over the course of the spring and summer, PASD staff had thus created an array of schedules covering in-person, hybrid, and remote learning scenarios. Thinking through these various scheduling models in detail has helped the district feel better prepared to respond to the uncertainties that lie ahead in the 2020-2021 school year.



Dr. Alan Fegley
Superintendent, Phoenixville Area School District (PASD)

FAST FACTS

*SY2018-2019



PHOENIXVILLE AREA
SCHOOL DISTRICT (PA)

4,117 students

- **71.54%** White
- **14.71%** Hispanic
- **5.67%** African American
- **3.67%** Asian
- **4.82%** Multiracial

Total
Schools

6

(4 elementary, 1 middle,
1 high school)

Total
Staff

540

Preparing for Hybrid Learning

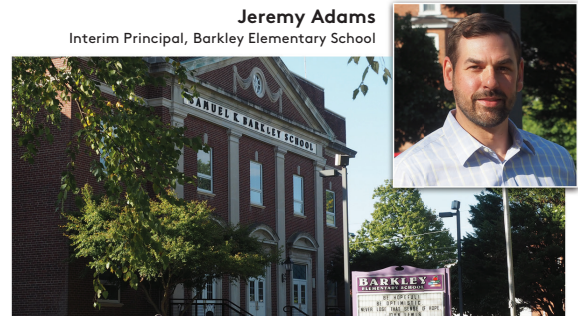
In spring 2020, Dr. Jessica Kilmetz, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, and the four principals of PASD's elementary schools had quickly learned how to use the DMSchedules software and had prepared schedules for in-person learning for the upcoming academic year. But by July, with COVID-19 infection rates increasing, it became clear to leadership at PASD that they should prepare to implement a hybrid model.

As the team approached scheduling hybrid models for fall 2020, they considered the following:

- Lessons Learned from Remote Learning During Spring 2020:** The team began by reflecting on the remote learning experience in spring 2020. When schools were suddenly ordered closed as of March 16, 2020, PASD moved to remote learning and kept intact the schedules that had been in place during the year.

Six-Day Specials Cycles Pose a Problem: The original schedule included a six-day cycle for specials. For grades 1-5, these specials consisted of art, music, physical education (2x), STEM, and library. For kindergarten, specials included Health and Wellness; Music and Movement; Theater and Dance; Art, Innovation, and Exploration; and Social/Yoga/Mindfulness. Including all of the specials in a six-day cycle had proved challenging to manage in a remote environment. Teachers, staff, and families provided feedback that it was difficult to juggle so many specials and to master all of the content from the different areas.

Class Blocks Felt Long: The one-hour class blocks felt long when conducted remotely. Students and teachers alike found it difficult to maintain engagement over that length of time.



Jeremy Adams
Interim Principal, Barkley Elementary School



Dr. Mwenyewe Dawan
Principal, Phoenixville Area Early Learning Center



Dr. Catherine Renzulli
Principal, Schuylkill Elementary School



Robyn Spear
Principal, Manavon Elementary School

Student-Teacher
Ratio:

14:1

Students Eligible for
Reduced-Price Meals:

30%

Special Education
Identification:

17%

Per Pupil
Expenditure:

\$13,463

- Health Concerns:** In planning for the fall, the PASD team had to take into account CDC guidelines, state guidelines, and health protocols for in-person learning. They needed to limit the number of staff interacting with student pods, maintain social distancing, and modify traditional instruction to eliminate shared materials.

The elementary scheduling team determined that if the district shifted to a hybrid model, grades K-5 would stick to a six-day schedule, with the classes divided into A and B cohorts, which would alternate meeting in person by day.

A Different Approach to Specials

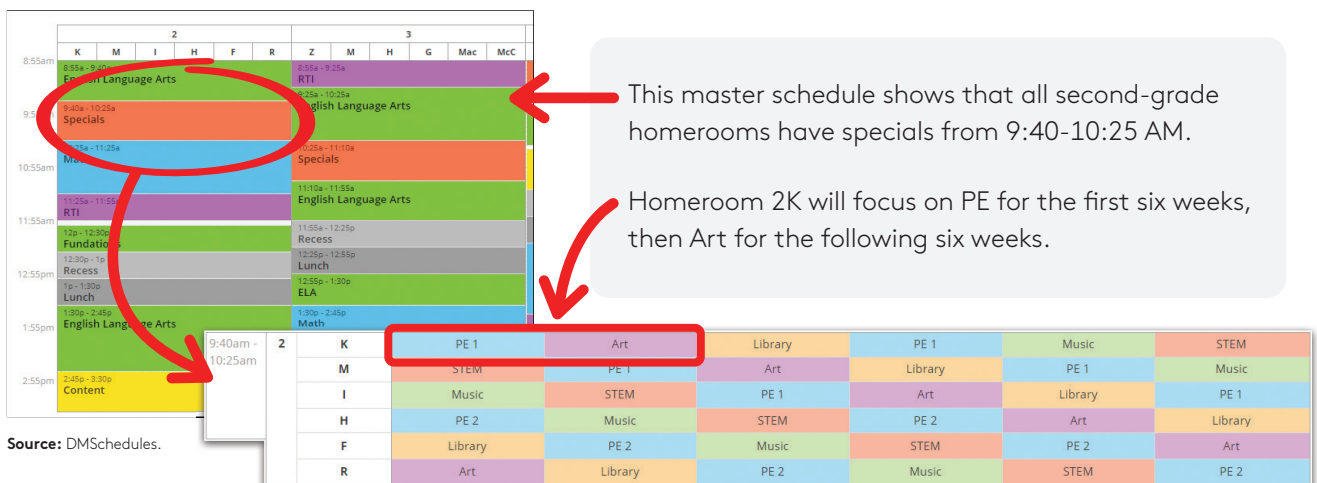
Encouraged to think outside the box for innovative solutions to make a hybrid model successful, Dr. Kilmetz and the four elementary principals reflected further on the challenges encountered this past spring, and came up with the idea of having classrooms focus on one special at a time for multiple weeks. Classrooms would then rotate through the specials over the course of the year. This approach would enable students to have an immersive experience in one content area, making learning easier. Specials teachers would also be able to form a closer connection with students and homeroom teachers, which is particularly important during remote learning, when engagement is especially challenging.

Working with their scheduling specialist at DMGroup, the team determined that each homeroom could have six-week rotations for each of the six specials over the course of the academic year (*Exhibit 1*). This approach also made sense from a health standpoint, as the six-week blocks would limit the number of students that staff would see in person and would eliminate the need for staff to travel to different buildings. In addition, this approach would increase the capacity for specials staff to support arrival, dismissal, and other transitions that were now more logistically complex due to COVID-19.

“With DMSchedules, the PASD team was able to tackle with ease the creation of schedules for every scenario.”

Exhibit 1 SCHEDULE SHOWING SIX-WEEK ROTATIONS FOR EACH OF THE SIX SPECIALS

Each homeroom would focus on one special for a six-week period. Over the course of the academic year, each homeroom would rotate through all six specials.



Needing to Pivot: Remote Learning Announced for the Fall

The team of principals was pleased with the schedules they had created for a hybrid model. But then, at the August 6th board meeting, in response to the infection rates, the Board of School Directors voted to have students begin fall 2020 in an all-virtual format.

By now, the PASD team was confident in their ability to tackle any scheduling challenge. While it was another curveball to have to create a third set of schedules, the team rose to the occasion.

Six-week Specials Rotations

As they thought about fully remote schedules, the principals considered doubling up specials classes (e.g. having two sections take art together); this would free up staff time to provide additional supports. However, this arrangement was not possible due to teacher contracts, so they reverted to one section per special class. But they did keep the six-week rotations of specials, which they felt would be easier for students and families in a remote learning setting.

Shorter Instructional Blocks

They considered the feedback they had received on the springtime remote learning about how difficult it was to maintain engagement during the long class periods. Having students stare at a screen and listen to lessons

hour after hour was tiring for students and was not very engaging. Teachers too found this way of teaching exhausting. For this reason, the team decided to divide class time into two shorter blocks: the first block could focus on direct instruction and guided practice, and the second block could then be used for small group work and independent practice.



For example, math, which was normally a one-hour class, is now on the new remote learning schedule twice each day (*Exhibit 2*). Each morning there is a half hour for direct math instruction, and each afternoon there is a half hour of math practice or independent activities. Similarly, reading and writing appear two times per day in this schedule. In addition, short ten-minute blocks for cursive writing and mind/movement help break up the day for students. One principal explained, “The goal for splitting up subjects into different blocks of time is to give [teachers] more flexibility to work with small groups and independent work. The first block of a schedule should focus on direct instruction and guided practice.

Exhibit 2 SAMPLE GRADE SCHEDULE FOR VIRTUAL INSTRUCTION

	3a (HR: Havrilla)	3b (HR: Freeman)	3c (HR: Howell)	3d (HR: Kane)	3e (HR: Shehan)	3f (HR: Young)
9:00am	9a Morning	9a Morning	9a Morning	9a Morning	9a Morning	9a Morning
	9:15a - 9:45a Math DI	9:15a - 9:45a Math DI	9:15a - 9:45a Math DI	9:15a - 9:45a Math DI	9:15a - 9:45a Math DI	9:15a - 9:45a Math DI
10:00am	9:45a - 10:30a Reading DI	9:45a - 10:30a Reading DI	9:45a - 10:30a Reading DI	9:45a - 10:30a Reading DI	9:45a - 10:30a Reading DI	9:45a - 10:30a Reading DI
	10:30a Cursive	10:30a Cursive	10:30a Cursive	10:30a Cursive	10:30a Cursive	10:30a Cursive
	10:40a Mind/Move	10:40a Mind/Move	10:40a Mind/Move	10:40a Mind/Move	10:40a Mind/Move	10:40a Mind/Move
11:00am	10:50a - 11:20a Writing	10:50a - 11:20a Writing	10:50a - 11:20a Writing	10:50a - 11:20a Writing	10:50a - 11:20a Writing	10:50a - 11:20a Writing
	11:20a - 12p Sci/SS	11:20a - 12p Sci/SS	11:20a - 12p Sci/SS	11:20a - 12p Sci/SS	11:20a - 12p Sci/SS	11:20a - 12p Sci/SS
12:00pm	12p - 12:30p Recess	12p - 12:30p Recess	12p - 12:30p Recess	12p - 12:30p Recess	12p - 12:30p Recess	12p - 12:30p Recess
	12:30p - 1p Lunch	12:30p - 1p Lunch	12:30p - 1p Lunch	12:30p - 1p Lunch	12:30p - 1p Lunch	12:30p - 1p Lunch
1:00pm	1p - 1:30p Math Sm	1p - 1:30p Math Sm	1p - 1:30p Math Sm	1p - 1:30p Math Sm	1p - 1:30p Math Sm	1p - 1:30p Math Sm
	1:30p - 2p Reading Sm	1:30p - 2p Reading Sm	1:30p - 2p Reading Sm	1:30p - 2p Reading Sm	1:30p - 2p Reading Sm	1:30p - 2p Reading Sm
2:00pm	2p - 2:45p Specials	2p - 2:45p Specials	2p - 2:45p Specials	2p - 2:45p Specials	2p - 2:45p Specials	2p - 2:45p Specials
	2:45p - 3p Writing Sm	2:45p - 3p Writing Sm	2:45p - 3p Writing Sm	2:45p - 3p Writing Sm	2:45p - 3p Writing Sm	2:45p - 3p Writing Sm
3:00pm	3p - 3:30p RTI	3p - 3:30p RTI	3p - 3:30p RTI	3p - 3:30p RTI	3p - 3:30p RTI	3p - 3:30p RTI

In this remote-learning schedule, math, normally a one-hour class, is split into a **half hour** of direct instruction in the morning.

In the afternoon, there is a **half hour** for math practice or independent work.

Source: DMSchedules.

“

With this tool, once the master schedule is created, you literally click a button to produce all of these other schedules. It saves you time. In a time like this year, I can't tell you how grateful we were to have this tool!

– Dr. Mwenyewe Dawan

Principal, Phoenixville Area Early Learning Center

The second block of time should focus on small group work and independent practice of the skill.”

In the fully remote schedules, the team also built in a shared lunch block from noon to 1 PM across all grades and schools to provide common planning time as well as time for teachers to communicate with each other and with students.

Prepared for Whatever Lies Ahead: Remote, Hybrid, and In-Person

Between spring 2020 and mid-August, the PASD team had created schedules for in-person, hybrid, and fully remote learning scenarios in order to be prepared for the uncertainty ahead. Although it was a lot of work for the team, going through this exercise helped everyone think through the details of how the schedules could work best, and DMSchedules' user-friendly, powerful software had made it easy. They could set the minutes of instruction for each subject and then drag and drop pre-sized blocks to construct the schedule.

Schedules that used to take them days to create could now be done in hours. Dr. Mwenyewe Dawan, principal of the Phoenixville Area Early Learning Center, commented, “In the past, I would use Excel to build the master schedule. I would have multiple people review the schedules before publishing them to staff because there would invariably be errors or oversights. We're human and it is hard to catch everything when building complex schedules. But this tool catches errors—actually, errors are caught as it is being built. It's worth every penny for that reason.”

With DMSchedules, once the master schedule for each scenario is created, the following supporting schedules are only a click away:

- Homeroom teacher schedules
- Student schedules
- Specials teachers' schedules

Dr. Dawan further shared, “After creating the master schedule, I or the teacher is expected to literally create individual schedules for every staff member, which is so time consuming. With this tool, once the master schedule is created, you literally click a button to produce all of these other schedules. It saves you time. In a time like this year, I can't tell you how grateful we were to have this tool!”

With the software, teachers could have visibility into student schedules, and administrators had full visibility into teacher, staff, and student schedules. Plus, DMSchedules allows for schedule sharing among teachers and staff: every administrator, homeroom teacher, specials teacher, and support staff can see each homeroom and specials schedule. In a remote or hybrid setting where students and teachers are not all together, it is very helpful to be able to see each other's schedules and know what everyone is doing.

If a sudden pivot is needed from one model to another during SY2020-21, PASD elementary schools are ready. Dr. Fegley's decision to use DMSchedules this spring felt like a prescient move. With DMSchedules, the PASD team was able to tackle with ease the creation of schedules for every scenario. The world feels as if it is in chaos, at the mercy of the COVID-19 virus, but PASD elementary schools have schedules ready for whatever scenario is before them. ♦