



District  
Management  
Group

DMGROUP IN ACTION

# Reimagining Elementary Schedules for This Fall

*Lessons Learned from the Pandemic*

*by Craig Gibbons*

Originally published in the *District Management Journal*, v.29, Spring 2021

*While a variety of tactics were utilized, the common behavior was that educators considered student learning priorities, reevaluated their use of time, and discontinued lower-impact practices and materials.*

# DMGroup in Action

## Reimagining Elementary Schedules for This Fall

*Lessons Learned from the Pandemic*

Craig Gibbons



In the face of a global pandemic, educators shifted, seemingly overnight, to new modalities and evolved from long-held practices to new ways of teaching. It took a tremendous amount of effort and time, but educators stepped up, innovated, and found ways to deliver for their students. During this crisis, we have seen educators learn and embrace new technologies, adopt new practices, and critically assess the greatest needs of their students. In short, albeit unwelcomed and devastating for so many, the pandemic became a catalyst for change.

As we work with districts and schools to plan for the new school year, we find ourselves reflecting on the lessons that

have been learned and how education could or should look differently going forward. There is a unique opportunity to leverage some of the positive practices developed over the past year and carry them forward to create some new norms rather than just returning to pre-pandemic traditional practices. In addition, “learning loss,” “learning recovery,” or what we like to call “accelerating learning” is posing new challenges that are top of mind for everyone. The opportunities are numerous, but the following summary outlines a few ideas regarding scheduling that are worth considering as you think about your plans to meet the needs of all students in the fall and beyond.

## Exhibit 1 SCHEDULE WITH STAGGERED ARRIVAL AND DEPARTURE TIMES



Source: DMSchedules, [www.dmschedules.com](http://www.dmschedules.com)

### Schedule for Health and Safety

Since March 2020, health and safety have been of paramount concern, and schools have had to drastically alter schedules in order to safeguard students, teachers, and staff. During periods of in-person learning, schedules had to include many adjustments, such as:

- Staggered arrival and departure times (*Exhibit 1*)
- Scheduled time for cleaning and hand-washing
- Minimized transitions to limit the number of students in hallways and lunchrooms

### Schedule to Address Social and Emotional Needs

During times of remote learning, many schools acknowledged the challenges of Zoom fatigue and the need to make time for students to connect with each other and with their teachers and staff. Some scheduling innovations included:

- Opening and Closing circle time at the beginning and end of each day for dedicated SEL time.

- Splitting 40-minute core instruction classes into 20 minutes of direct instruction in the morning and 20 minutes of group time or asynchronous instruction in the afternoon. Breaking up class time improved engagement; keeping students engaged for 40 minutes over Zoom often proved challenging. Small-group time provided the opportunity for teachers to work more closely with students and allowed closer bonds to be established between students and teachers and among students.
- Scheduling in a 5-minute stretch, 10 minutes of guided physical activity, or additional recesses during the day.
- Scheduling time to connect one-on-one with teachers or in small groups with other students.

Even if all schooling can be in person in the coming school year, time will still need to be scheduled to help students reconnect with each other and with the teachers and staff, in order to make up for missed opportunities for social-emotional learning, which is such an important part of development.

## Have Clarity on Instructional Guidelines, Specify Instructional Minutes, and Ensure These Are Protected on the Schedule

The challenge of trying to provide instruction during the pandemic forced districts and schools to focus on what mattered most. Having clear instructional priorities, expectations, guidelines, and stronger communication was the first essential step. The next step was to ensure that the schedule made time for the required instructional minutes.

Those utilizing DMSchedules software to build schedules were able to set as a default setting the required instructional minutes; then, regardless of whether they were building schedules for in-person, hybrid, or remote learning, these schools or districts were able to ensure that students in different schools and classrooms received similar access and minutes of instruction (*Exhibit 2*).

For the next school year, if you don't already have instructional guidelines that include grade-level subjects and instructional minutes for each day in your schedule cycle, now is the time to create them. If you have them,

now is the time to reevaluate them. Your subjects and their instructional minute guidelines should be aligned with your district and school learning goals and should incorporate insights gained over the past year. Then, make sure your schedule embeds protected time for the instructional minutes you have specified.

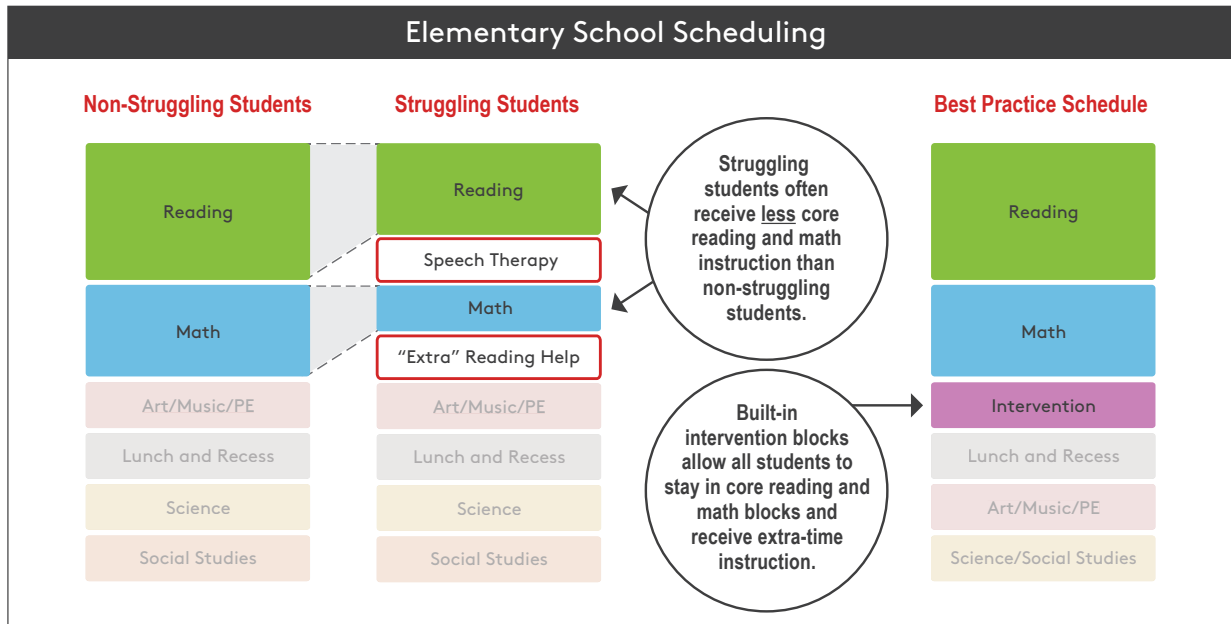
## Get Back to Basics and Focus on the Core

Coupled with the focus on instructional priorities was the trend of getting “back to basics.” Many elementary educators strengthened their focus on core academics in support of English Language Arts (ELA) and math. Determine whether you have allocated ample time and have created the right conditions under which quality instruction and learning can occur for ELA and math. Enabling quality instruction often involves establishing guidelines for student supports to avoid the delivery of pullout services during core ELA and math instruction. If you have introduced tools to augment student learning, consider how you can continue to use these tools in helpful ways going forward.

*Exhibit 2* DMSCHEDULES PERIOD-ALLOCATION TABLE

Period	Daily Minutes by Grade					
	K	1	2	3	4	5
Arrival	25	25	25	25	25	25
Morning Announcements (Morning)	5	5	5	5	5	5
Dismissal (Dismiss)	5	5	5	5	5	5
Specials	45	45	45	45	45	45
Lunch	25	25	25	25	25	25
Recess	25	25	25	25	25	25
English Language Arts (ELA)	130	130	130	130		
Reading					70	70
Writing					60	60
Math	70	70	70	70	70	70
Intervention/Enrichment (I/E)	30	30	30	30	30	30
Science/Social Studies (Sci/SS)	60	60	60	60		
Science					30	30
Social Studies (SS)					30	30
<b>TOTAL</b> <small>(over/under allocated)</small>	<b>420</b>	<b>420</b>	<b>420</b>	<b>420</b>	<b>420</b>	<b>420</b>

Source: DMSchedules, [www.dmschedules.com](http://www.dmschedules.com)



Source: DMGroup.

## Leveraging Synchronous and Asynchronous Approaches

The challenges of the past year forced many schools to consider what should be taught synchronously (learning with the teacher present) versus what could be taught asynchronously (learning without the teacher present). Teachers structured their lessons so that learning that required greater support by teachers and staff would occur while they were present with students. They also explored tactics and tools for asynchronous lessons to reinforce teacher-led learning. Some teachers adopted a flipped-classroom approach to help students access lessons during asynchronous learning time and to prepare for synchronous learning. While a variety of tactics were utilized, the common behavior was that educators considered student learning priorities, reevaluated their use of time, and discontinued lower-impact practices and materials.

While teachers and students alike look forward to in-person learning, reflect on what worked asynchronously and explore whether some lessons from the past year may inform your schedules in the future.

## Intervention and Enrichment Are Critical to Address Learning Loss

Schools have been creative in their efforts to provide additional support and interventions where possible.

"Asynchronous days" or daily asynchronous time created opportunities for teachers to meet with other teachers, determine students' needs, and create student groupings with content-strong staff for intervention support.

Support for students with greater needs was commonly prioritized, providing those students with more frequent access to in-person instruction when limited in-person or hybrid models were in place. Historically, under pre-pandemic conditions, the ability to prioritize this intervention and support time has proved challenging or elusive.

Making intervention a priority and updating instructional guidelines to include a dedicated intervention block with sufficient time to deliver targeted interventions will be critical in your efforts to address learning loss. Moreover, once you have made time for interventions in your schedules (*Exhibit 3*), you'll need to help teachers and staff understand how this time should be used and clearly communicate each person's role in supporting interventions. This often requires documenting expectations for the effective use of this time and delivering professional development to help teachers and staff access teaching tools and strategies, assess and create student groups based on student needs, assign content-strong teachers to groups, and maximize the impact of this time with students.

**“ While a variety of tactics were utilized, the common behavior was that educators considered student learning priorities, reevaluated their use of time, and discontinued lower-impact practices and materials.**

### **Immersive Specials Instead of Traditional Specials Rotations Yield Benefits**

Many traditional offerings were reevaluated this year based on student and staff health and safety concerns. When schools were operating in person, specials (PE, art, music, library, etc.) could not simply rotate through different classrooms throughout the day as they traditionally did pre-pandemic. Interactions between different student groups and staff needed to be limited, and materials needed to be cleaned. During remote learning, students and parents found it challenging to access multiple different materials each week for their various specials classes.

In response to these challenges, traditional specials rotations were cast aside, and very different specials rotations emerged. Some classrooms received the same special for weekly or multi-week cycles. When school was in person, this approach helped to minimize the number of interactions between specials teachers and different classrooms; during remote learning, this approach made it much easier for students and parents as they weren't constantly needing to pull out different materials. An unintended benefit was that relationships between specials teachers and students were more quickly and easily formed; the specials teacher would see the same group of students for a full week or sometimes even for multiple weeks.

How specials have traditionally been offered should not limit your thinking about how they could be offered differently. Did you create different specials, implement new specials cycles, or create richer specials experiences during the pandemic? How can specials integrate more meaningfully and reinforce or extend lessons in the classroom? Take a step back and reevaluate traditional specials to see if this year's experiences have uncovered ways to improve the impact of specials for your students and their learning.

### **Leverage Technology to Support the Classroom**

Remote learning forced many educators to adopt non-traditional technologies. Video conferencing was used to meet with students. Learning Management Systems were enhanced or adopted to organize assignments and communicate expectations more effectively. Scheduling and other operations platforms were adopted to quickly plan and respond to rapidly changing circumstances. A host of online learning platforms were adopted to augment classroom learning for core and non-core subjects, social-emotional learning, and more. While the effectiveness of implementation varied across districts and schools, educators explored and experimented with tools they had never used before or didn't know existed.

The adoption of various technologies opened new doors to support teaching and learning in ways that likely wouldn't have been explored under "normal" conditions. Review what worked well, what could be improved, and what should be discontinued. Leverage this time to consider how tools and technology can continue to be used to enhance learning.

The coronavirus pandemic forced educators nationwide to develop a new way to teach students, from the first day of closures in March 2020 through the entire 2020-21 school year. Summoning tremendous creativity and ingenuity, educators have evolved and innovated rapidly to support students. While everyone yearns for a "return to normal," educators should make sure to leverage the innovations seen over the past year. Seize this moment to leverage the fruits of your collective efforts and drive the sector forward for the benefit of our nation's students. ♦