

## *Retaining the Length of the School Day*

### *Creating Opportunities for Planning*

#### **Proposal**

Maintain the school day in its present form (including the use of “special” teachers) and explore existing opportunities for planning and integrated curriculum. Since the current teacher contract expires at the end of the next school year, the District should begin collaborating now with the Peoria Federation of Teachers (PFT) to lengthen the school day and school year and build in more opportunities for common planning time.

#### **Background**

The District has stated that a great deal of value will come from creating more opportunities for teachers to plan cooperatively. We do not doubt that more time for teachers to work together will have some benefits, but feel that not enough exploration has been done to best utilize existing opportunities for planning.

To measure the potential impact of the Administration-advocated school day, we first need to understand the total amount of time that will be allowed for planning. As it stands, the 2008-9 school year will place the 45 minute prep period at the front of the day for all primary teachers. If every minute of every planning period were available for this purpose, the District would be building **127.5 hours** of common planning time.<sup>1</sup>

Creating such a large number of “common planning hours,” of course, is not feasible or even necessarily desirable. At the May 5 School Board meeting, Dr. Thom Simpson stated that while all the prep time would happen simultaneously, “common planning” would only be structured once or twice a week (**26.25 total hours**<sup>2</sup> or **52.5 total hours**<sup>3</sup>, respectively). Additionally, the currently effective contract with the PFT states that only one prep-period a month can be used by the District in a structured manner, such as grade-level meetings (**6.75 total hours**)<sup>4</sup>. The current contract language reads, in part [emphasis ours]:

VII (V) Preparation Period Activities -- During preparation periods and when teachers are not primarily engaged in classroom activities, a teacher shall be engaged in any of the following activities that the teacher **may choose**:

- a. Planning and preparation of educational materials.
- b. Participating in parent / teacher meetings.
- c. Voluntary tutoring of students.
- d. Assisting other staff members.
- e. Evaluating recent educational research and devising implementation strategies for a particular school.

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<sup>1</sup>  $\frac{3}{4}$  hour \* 170 full school days = 127.5 hours

<sup>2</sup>  $\frac{3}{4}$  hour \* 35 full school weeks = 26.25 hours (does not include first or last week of school, Thanksgiving week, Christmas break or Spring break).

<sup>3</sup>  $\frac{3}{4}$  hour \* 35 full school weeks \* 2 = 52.5 hours

<sup>4</sup>  $\frac{3}{4}$  hour \* 9 full school months = 6.75 hours (does not include August or June)

- f. Engaging in other activities whose purpose is to enhance student achievement, including the professional growth of the teacher.
- g. Collaborating with colleagues in grade level or department.

**The intent of this provision is that the teacher may choose any activity consistent with a. through g. in which to be engaged. The administration may for one prep period per month prescribe an activity designed to enhance student achievement, including professional growth of the teacher.**

## Recommendations

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We agree that value can come from more time for teachers to work together. However, we believe that much of that value can be attained without shortening the school day. We recommend the following:

1. *Negotiate with the Peoria Federation of Teachers* to allow more than one prep period per month to be used for structured interaction between teachers within a grade level.
2. *Utilize the common prep periods that are already in place.* In our research of all the primary schools within the District, we found that most grade levels at the affected primary schools had at least one concurrent prep period each week. A number of schools had concurrent, grade-level prep periods twice a week. Anecdotal evidence, however, shows that these concurrent prep periods are rarely used for common planning (possibly because of the teacher contract and possibly because there has been no focus on such). If the District were able to transform the existing concurrent prep periods into common planning time, the result would be **26.25 hours** of planning time each year.<sup>5</sup> This would be greater for schools with more concurrent, grade-level prep periods. At schools where some grade levels do not have this already, the schedule could easily be altered to accommodate one concurrent planning period each week.
3. *Better utilize “Student Improvement Days”.* The 2008-9 school year has 6 planned half-days, three in each semester. On these days, students are in school for 3 hours, teachers are allowed 30 minutes for lunch and 3 hours of teacher time remain for other activities. These three hours could be best utilized by common grade-level planning or even inter-grade level planning. The result would be **18 hours** of common prep time.<sup>6</sup> Since the teacher’s contract mandates that one of these student improvement days each semester be unstructured (teachers work in their classrooms on grades), the District might need to negotiate with the PFT to create more planning time. Even the worst case scenario yields the District an additional 12 hours of planning time.
4. *Better utilize “Institute Days”.* The 2008-9 school year has four “institute days” wherein teachers report to school but no children do. Of these four, two come in the middle of the semester and would be ideal opportunities for building-wide or grade-level planning (the other two are before and after the school year and likely would not be useful as

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<sup>5</sup>  $\frac{3}{4}$  hour \* 35 full school weeks = 26.25

<sup>6</sup> 3 hours \* 6 Student Improvement Days = 18 hours

common planning periods). If two institute days were transformed into common planning days, the District would create **13 hours** of common prep time.<sup>7</sup>

5. *Encourage and facilitate informal cooperative planning.* The best teachers in District 150 already collaborate with their peers informally. This happens before and after school, at lunch, in the halls, and over the weekend. The District can help this occur through a better use of technology (email platforms, grade-level Internet bulletin boards and chat rooms, web-delivered training on specific topics) and professional development opportunities. The District could also collaborate with the PFT to offer incentives for teachers who can document their interactions.
6. *Create a monthly “Grade Level Planning Day”.* If more hours of common planning time are necessary, the District could create an opportunity for all teachers within a grade-level to have 6.5 hours of additional planning time each month. Under this proposal, one day each month would be reserved for planning. For example, on the first Friday of the month, all first-grade teachers (District-wide) could have “planning day.” Their classes would be covered by certified substitute teachers or, where available, assistant principals or District staff (with proper certifications). The planning day could be held within the building (i.e. all Harrison first-grade teachers work together for 6.5 hours) or split between District-wide meetings for 3 hours and building meetings for the remainder of the time. If “planning days” were instituted, the District would create **58.5 hours** of common prep time each year.<sup>8</sup>

We realize that this last option would cost the District more money. The standard pay for a full-day substitute teacher in District 150 is \$75. “Planning Days” would be instituted at all 12 primary schools (excludes Edison schools, Valeska Hinton and Roosevelt). If each school has three classrooms of each grade level, the District will need pay for 180 full-day substitutes each month. At the current rate, the cost would be \$13,500 per month or \$121,500 per year (plus any costs for District-wide meetings). If research showed that common planning time has limited impact for certain grade levels, they could be eliminated from this plan. Instituting “planning days” only for 2<sup>nd</sup> through 4<sup>th</sup> grade, for example, would cost the District an additional \$72,900 each year.

To summarize this set of recommendations, the District’s solution *at best* creates **127.5 hours** of common planning time each year (assuming every prep period is used for common planning). Not counting our suggestion for more informal planning, our recommendations result in **115.75** hours of common planning each year. Since many of our proposals do not require changing the contract with PFT, the District would likely get more common prep time from this set of recommendations than from its own.

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<sup>7</sup> 3 hours \* 6.5 hours of duty time = 13 hours

<sup>8</sup> 6.5 hours \* 9 full school months (does not include August or June)

## Two Alternate Proposals

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If the concept of “planning days” is not workable, the District could negotiate with the PFT to accept payment of teachers for one additional prep period each week (to be held either before or after school). The going-rate for paying a teacher for missing a prep period is \$26. If all primary teachers at each school were paid \$26 extra per week, the total cost to the District would be \$163,800.<sup>9</sup>

If the District wanted to create such an opportunity, but at a lower cost, it could keep the current schedule, but reserve the first 30 minutes of each day for a grade-level-wide assembly (Kindergarten on Monday, 1<sup>st</sup> Grade on Tuesday, etc.). This assembly could cover various topics and presented by volunteers, professionals from other organizations, or prep teachers. Topics could include health, careers, fire safety, etc. The District could tap into the vast wealth of expertise in Peoria to present these assemblies. In fact, many local nonprofit organizations might be able to write grants to fund presentations on important topics to thousands of primary school children each year. A typical Tuesday, then, might look like this:

|   |                                   |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| All teachers report for duty                  | 8:30 am                           |
| All students arrive                           | between 8:30 and 8:45 am (in gym) |
| Students in classroom (K, 2-4)                | 8:40 am                           |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> Grade teacher common planning | 8:30 am - 9:15 am                 |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> Grade special assembly        | 8:45 am - 9:15 am                 |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> Grade in classroom            | 9:15 am                           |
| School ends                                   | 3:15 pm                           |

## Other Considerations

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District Administration has also argued that the new school day schedule provides opportunities for teachers from different grade levels to work together to challenge advanced students or assist struggling ones. One example given at the May 5 Board meeting was of an advanced 1<sup>st</sup> grade reader being able to attend a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade class room occasionally for reading instruction. We agree, but again feel that not enough has been done to explore and encourage current opportunities for exactly that. While not all schedules for all classes match up each day, some classes match up throughout the week. Creative principals and teachers can construct schedules that allow for these opportunities.

Regarding the value of integrated curricula, we again agree but would challenge the District to prove this is not happening to some degree already. Further, the very research presented to the Board by Dr. Simpson in support of integrated curricula also stated the following:

“Therefore, teaching content separately should not be abandoned in favor of integration, nor should integration be set aside in efforts to teach subjects

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<sup>9</sup> 3 teachers/grade \* 5 grade levels/school \* 12 primary schools \* 35 full school weeks \* \$26 = \$163,800

discretely. A balance between the two strategies is necessary because both are effective means of increasing student achievement.” (pp 107) <sup>10</sup>

We question how primary school teachers will be adequately prepared and trained to teach subjects such as art, physical education, science, language arts and music at a level equivalent to dedicated “specials” teachers. We have no suggestions regarding replacing these important teachers. Given the alternative of creating *more* planning time under our above proposal and gaining even better results than the District’s proposal, we do not feel the need for these positions to be eliminated.

### Financial Alternatives

We choose to trust you when you say that the decision to shorten the school day is less about money and more about educational achievement. Nevertheless, we realize that District 150 is under cost constraints due both to less-than-expected state funding and its own past decisions. While not privy to the internal financial documents, nor trained as accountants, we nonetheless thought it important to offer some suggestions for ways to save money. Considering that the decision to shorten the school day would result in a financial savings and that our suggestions might cost extra money, we offer the following:

1. In June of 2005, the Board accepted the final report of the “Structural Budget Imbalance Task Force.” Within that report was a series of recommendations that, if adopted, would save the District millions of dollars. Notably, the Task Force strove to recommend cuts while still “keeping children in school, providing choice, obtaining efficiencies through consolidations, [and] achieving reductions through attrition...” (pp 5). We are unclear about the progress of these recommendations, but wanted to point out the cost savings of a number of items:

|                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| \$175,000               | Food service – “Return to previous structure to provide school lunch program. School will provide food service. School to contract with local vendor to provide food.” (pp 12)                              |
| \$ 69,000 <sup>11</sup> | RIF Administrator – “RIF 2-3 Administrators. Associated Clerical staff to be reassigned or attrited as applicable per contract.” (pp 12)  |
| \$280,000               | Pharmaceutical Vendor – “Award bid changing vendors for the District’s prescription drugs used in its employee benefit program.” (pp 12)  |
| \$160,000               | Department Heads @ HS – “As necessary, negotiate elimination of release time for staff working on curriculum and assessment and revert to practice of using before school volunteers for the same.” (pp 13) |
| <b>\$684,000</b>        | <b>Total</b>  |

<sup>10</sup> Hinde, Elizabeth R. "Revisiting Curriculum Integration: A Fresh Look at an Old Idea." The Social Studies (May/June 2005)

<sup>11</sup> Given the level of salaries within District 150 administration, this number could be higher.

2. The District seems to rely heavily on the use of consultants, especially outside organizations and former District employees who are retired and re-hired. While some endeavors certainly require outside expertise, still others could be handled by talented and experienced people already on the payroll. This might necessitate a shifting of duties to align with priorities. Some examples of consulting costs that could have been saved by using staff:
  - a. \$50,000 for principal mentoring
  - b. \$150,000 for programming/building design for Glen Oak School (Best Practices, Inc.)
  - c. \$400,000 for Manual Re-structuring (Johns Hopkins)

We have further identified a list administrative staff who have either retired and been re-hired as consultants (the first two) or for whom there seems to be plan to do the same in the upcoming school year (the last three). Figures from [www.championnews.net](http://www.championnews.net) database:

| Staff Initials | 2007 Salary |
|----------------|-------------|
| T.S.           | \$ 97,194   |
| S.F.           | \$ 160,152  |
| M.R.           | \$ 93,708   |
| S.R.           | \$ 95,043   |
| C.F.           | \$ 137,085  |

We do not doubt the value of certain expertise, but in times of budget constraints we feel it more prudent to take advantage of attrition opportunities.

3. Reduce the number of assistant principals. The District once had a policy that schools with an enrollment under 400 would not require an assistant principal. The following schools could be included:

|                                    |                                  |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Sterling Middle School             | \$ 90,203                        |
| Trewyn Middle School (from 2 to 1) | \$ 72,360                        |
| Franklin-Edison Primary School     | \$ 91,191                        |
| Roosevelt (from 2 to 1)            | \$ 58,711                        |
| <b>Total</b>                       | <b>\$312,465 (plus benefits)</b> |

These positions could be replaced by "Lead Teachers" as is in place at Irving and Garfield for significantly less dollars. Existing assistant principals could be re-assigned to current vacancies.

4. Reduce number of associate or assistant superintendents by one, but do not hire them back as a consultant. According to [www.championnews.net](http://www.championnews.net), the three associate/assistant superintendents made salaries in 2007 of \$114,885; \$128,233; and \$137,085 (not including benefits).