It’s Good to Be Inflexible
Are flexible library schedules better than fixed ones? Not necessarily

Look, I’m tired of getting beat up about our fixed-schedule library media programs. I’ve offered my last apology. I know the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), through its position papers, standards, and editorial policies, says in no uncertain terms that flexibly scheduled library programs are good and programs with fixed library schedules are bad. Granted there is some research about the benefits of flexibly scheduled programs, and any time we can work toward proven best practices, we should.

But unfortunately, what many dedicated professionals hear is: “School media specialists in flexibly scheduled programs are good and school media specialists in programs with fixed schedules are bad.” This one-sided philosophy takes the wind out of the sails of many media specialists who are on fixed schedules. Is there no room in the AASL tent for both the flexible and the fixed? I believe there are some serious downsides to flexible scheduling and strengths to fixed scheduling that I can’t find addressed in the literature:

1. You can’t teach kids you don’t see. I’ve never met a media specialist in a flex program that meets with every teacher on staff, let alone for an equal amount of time. Granted, those students whose teacher is cooperative get a superior learning experience. But what about the kids whose teachers are so isolationist that they don’t even get to the library for book checkout, let alone to learn media skills? Shouldn’t we be asking: Do we give some kids great skills and other kids no skills, or do we give all kids the ability to learn some skills knowing that we could do better in an ideal world?

2. We are enabling teachers to deviate from the curriculum. High-stakes testing will be a fixed mountain in our political landscape for some time, like it or not. One benefit of testing has been to standardize our curriculum to make sure all teachers actually teach the skills they are expected to teach. Unless “flexible” scheduling is mandated for every class, it encourages the rogue-teacher mentality of teaching: “what I want to teach and when I want to teach it.” Shouldn’t we be asking: Does a flexible or fixed schedule work better with a prescribed curriculum?

3. It’s not just research, but reading. The library media program’s emphasis on improving reading skills by encouraging independent reading practice may prove to be the hobbit that saves us from the goblins looking for “nonessential” programs to whack. Every child deserves time every week to experience storytimes, booktalks, and, for goodness sake, book checkout! Shouldn’t we be asking: Do we sacrifice our role in promoting lifelong readers, best done with regular library media center visits, in deference to our role in teaching technology and information literacy skills in flexibly scheduled programs?

4. Inquiry should be a daily activity. Flexible scheduling seems to encourage teachers and media specialists to work together only on big projects during the school year. But how accurately does this reflect how adults conduct inquiry? Most of us do little bitty inquiry “projects” every day. Weekly mini-lessons that apply a single aspect of the inquiry process, tied to a class topic, may well provide better practice in real problem solving. Shouldn’t we be asking: Can smaller but continuous opportunities for practicing information literacy skills be as or more beneficial than a few, isolated larger projects?

5. We are neglecting our part in the containment agreement. Schools have three charges from society: teach, socialize, and contain. Yes, keeping an eye on the community’s young people while Mom and Dad are working. When media specialists in a fixed schedule also provide prep time, they are helping hold up the containment part of the school’s obligation. And let’s just get bottom-line pragmatic—it’s hard to fire prep-time providers. Shouldn’t we be asking: Do we want to work with a fixed schedule and have job security or with a flex schedule and be vulnerable to cuts?

Like it or not, we operate in a real world with budgets, differing teaching styles, and community expectations that impinge on our professional dignity. All good professionals play the best game they can with the cards they’ve been dealt. Never let a fixed schedule be an excuse for an ineffective program. Come on, AASL, take off the blinders.

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