

FLEXIBLE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

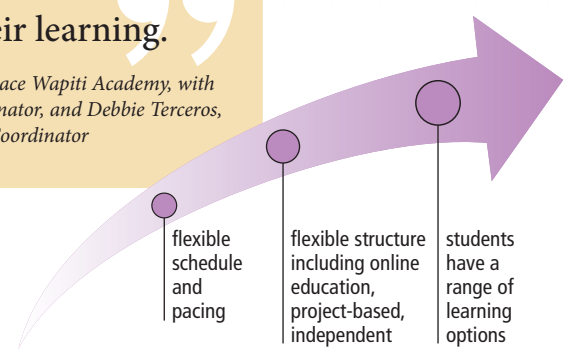
The principle of flexible learning environments acknowledges that learning takes place everywhere, not only in the classroom. It takes this idea and makes it real. Wanda Gerard, with colleagues Josina Nagtegaal and Debbie Terceros, notes, “There has been a shift in the ownership of the learning, with students taking on more responsibility. One teacher said, ‘It is not only about providing time in a day for students to decide how best to spend their time, but about allowing them to choose the best delivery method for an entire course, or choosing how to meet curriculum objectives within a course.’”

“Our definition: Students are provided with a wide range of learning options in terms of time and/or structure. Thereby, they are able to make choices related to their learning.”

Wanda Gerard, Principal, Peace Wapiti Academy, with Josina Nagtegaal, Flex Coordinator, and Debbie Terceros, CONNECT Coordinator

Flexible learning environments adapt to student requirements. For students who work or have other scheduling constraints due to sports or music programs, for example, these environments offer a variety of schedules and paces for student work. “Flex block helps kids manage their time,” says Janet Grenier. “Out of 500 students, we have only about three who live within walking distance. Many are on the bus for two hours a day, so flex block gives them time to work together on projects or get help if they need it.”

Structurally, the flexible learning environment expands beyond the classroom walls, allowing learning to take place in a variety of environments, including online. By offering choice through such environments, students determine what they learn, where they learn and when they learn. The role of the teacher in a flexible learning environment is to be a learning facilitator. Chuck Jenkins talks about how the shift to flexible learning environments affects attitudes, relationships and learning. He says, “It’s up to teachers to know what the flexibility options are for students outside of their classrooms. The attitude in the past has been to say to the kid, ‘It’s your problem, figure it out.’ Now teachers are asking, ‘What can I do for this kid?’”



“I would include ... providing student choice that promotes independence, creativity, innovation, critical thinking [and] entrepreneurial spirit.”

Darlene Marcinkevics, Principal, Spruce Grove

What is the impact on students?

Flexible learning environments offer students choices about their schedules, so that pursuit of extra-curricular activities is recognized as part of student learning. The approach is so attractive to some students that it makes the difference between attending high school and avoiding it altogether. Trevor Mitchell notes, “We’ve seen some of the biggest impact with our at-risk kids. At our school, there’s a lot of transience. Few kids are here for more than four or five years and many are functioning below grade level. With the flex project, attendance has gone up, completion rates have gone up, and intellectual engagement has increased. Over time, this will lead to academic improvements.”

A lot of it is about measuring students against themselves. “Sometimes,” Mitchell says, “a student grows way more than a year in a year, even though they’re still behind level.” He notes, “Sometimes you pick and choose your goals. Maybe the measure is, ‘Did you come to school more than not?’ But usually,” Mitchell asserts, “if you manage to get a kid hooked in one area, you’ll see gains in others.”

What is the impact on staff?

Flexible learning environments are often interactive and collaborative. These environments can take the form of small groups that meet to discuss, bounce ideas off one another, and share learnings. They can be very effective, alternate means of “structuring” time.

Great conversations have a way of expanding perspectives on issues while pinpointing specific aspects of the topic that make it unique. Students and teachers working together to discover these aspects of a topic cultivate student mastery of the material. Chuck Jenkins says, “Taking the 25-hour credit requirement off of each unit is like taking the handcuffs off of our high schools; it’s an opportunity to get a whole bunch of new ideas going.”

“I had a teacher who was struggling with how to fill the 125 hours for a course. ... I said, ‘Stop right there. You don’t have to do that anymore. Talk to me about the concepts that the kids need to acquire and understand.’ So that’s where we’re at – we’re changing the conversation.”

Greater opportunities for teacher collaboration also mean a greater variety of learning experiences. “In our school,” Trevor Mitchell explains, “humanities (or math and sciences) are given a large block of the day, and it’s up to the teachers to carve that up. This gives them the flexibility to do a large project, go on a field trip, or watch a movie without worrying that they’re eating the time for another class. It also works the other way – when teachers need time to write up report cards, we can give that time to students to self-direct. They decide what areas they need help in and seek that out.”

Tom Christensen notes the shift in perception that’s resulted as flexible learning environments have phased into his school. He says, “When I was first a principal, I defined a good day by whether the doors were all closed and the hallway was quiet. The environment we try to create here, and how we judge success, is by how many students are interacting in the open areas. If the students aren’t in the open areas, we’re not doing it, because that’s where learning is really going to happen.”

Wanda Gerard and her colleagues also note, “Teachers are recognizing that their perception of an ideal study/work place and time is not necessarily the ideal place for every student. Staff find it difficult to let students learn their way and have to take a step back sometimes to let them.”

Flexible learning environments lead to active learning experiences and enhanced learning opportunities. Darlene Marcinkevics describes another approach. “Rather than a flex block around lunch time, we’ve created a rotating seminar block. With a significant population that accesses school buses, personalized learning time (PLT) is invaluable in not only accessing teachers, but also in expanding cooperative learning opportunities beyond lunch hours.”

In a flexible learning environment:

- learning is student-centred
- students are responsible and accountable for their learning
- students have multiple entry and exit points into the curriculum
- new technologies facilitate online learning and one-on-one time with a teacher
- teachers are empowered to decide how best to structure time to teach students
- students have more control over the where, when and what they learn: they are more engaged, and by becoming more engaged, they are transforming their experiences into their education.

SOURCES: Wanda Gerard, Principal, Peace Wapiti Academy, with Josina Nagtegaal, Flex Coordinator, and Debbie Terceros, CONNECT Coordinator; Darlene Marcinkevics, Principal, Spruce Grove; Chuck Jenkins, Principal, Archbishop O’Leary; Trevor Mitchell, Principal, St. Francis, and Administrator, St. Mary; Greg Noyes, Principal, Catholic Central; Tom Christensen, Principal, Olds; Janet Grenier, Directrice, École Ste-Marguerite-Bourgeoys