

# Middle School Schedule as a Driver for Innovation

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## A great schedule helps both students and teachers grow and learn

*By: Derek McCoy*



Having worked as a middle school administrator and math teacher in school operations in several states and multiple schools for many years, I have seen my share of middle school schedules. As a presenter and workshop attendee, I love to ask dedicated middle school educators about what creative measures they take with their schedules to help students learn and demonstrate learning at higher levels as well as help teachers continue to grow.

The middle school schedule is a true opportunity. With some flexibility and vision building we can do many things without sacrificing core team time:

- Create time for every middle schooler to meet with every teacher and engage in problem-based or project-based learning
- Build opportunities for accelerated or passion-based learning
- Build time for students to meet
- Flex opportunities to receive academic support
- Ensure that these hard years are countered with strategic and impactful support from teachers

My professional learning and work experience has been around the middle school concept as opposed to the junior high school model. One of the major differences on the teacher side, which has the biggest impact on students, is building up and supporting core teams. Protecting time for a core group of teachers who teach a certain number of students to talk about student interventions, curriculum planning, and community building goes a long way to help students through growth experiences that are at times difficult, challenging, new, and exciting.

Supporting core teams is where the difference is made. Nothing is more important than wrapping support around a student.

However, I don't want my predilection towards middle schools to drive this talk. There are some incredibly creative things that can be done with the junior high schedule, especially with exploratory classes. For this share, I do want to highlight some of my specific experiences with the middle school schedule that have helped promote and accelerate our dives into innovative and change practices:

### Enhanced Professional Development

After a vision for change has been set and communicated to stakeholders, it's imperative to build up capacity in teachers and staff who have to implement. At West Rowan Middle, we set aside every Tuesday for professional development. It is either whole group, which focuses on large school-wide or district initiatives, or teachers choose from a menu of options they submit. This personalized approach allows teachers to fill specific gaps they may have or want to improve on. We make every effort to implement professional development for areas we know are upcoming and critical. Our teachers expect this every Tuesday.

### Essential Collaboration

Creating and protecting time for teams and grade level departments to create, implement, and refine instructional plans is essential. If we want teachers to produce the best, we have to inspire and empower them to do so. That involves creating and protecting time for core teams to talk about their student, plan PBLs or interdisciplinary units, and build community with students. Establishing meeting norms helps make these meetings productive. Our teachers know that on certain days nothing happens but curriculum planning. Administration doesn't push for meetings and we do our very best to protect that time from outside needs. If we want to see extraordinary instruction, we have to dedicate and protect time for teachers to be extraordinary.

### Digital Tools for Scheduling

A good friend of mine created "edcamp every day" for his middle school. Glenn Robbins (@Glennr1809) created a bold vision that would empower students to dive into some personal passions for a time set aside every day. To help organize this he used Google Classroom for sign ups and organization. At West Rowan Middle, we have created a 40-minute flex period that we use for various reasons including enrichment, clubs, special group meetings, academic support, sports exploration, and a host of other things. We use **SignUpGenius** to keep organized. Because our school can have multiple focuses going on at the same time, different from Glenn's edcamp model, we used a different tool. Create your vision first then choose your digital tool to match.

We can do so much more with our middle school schedule than just make sure students get math, reading, and PE. Our middle schoolers need opportunities to explore and develop passions. We help our teachers get better when we keep them current on strategies and implementations. A great vision helps set the school on a great course and the schedule is an important part of seeing it realized.

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