

CENTENNIAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL RETHINKING TIME FOR EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING

AN EXPANDED LEARNING TIME MODEL



THE
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INTRODUCTION

After more than five years of minimal student achievement, Denver Public Schools' (DPS) Centennial, a public elementary school in northwest Denver, was in dire need of change. In 2011-2012, Centennial was in the bottom 5 percent of metro Denver schools¹, and the school board moved the school into redesign — a process that requires all staff to reapply for their positions and gives leadership “full flexibility to identify new or different instructional programming for the school,” explains Principal Laura Munro. To make the needed impact on student learning and to build an improved culture, the school chose **Expeditionary Learning**, a research-based model that creates a learning environment where students are actively engaged with one another and in the world around them.

After hiring new staff and launching the model, Centennial's leadership team continued to search for academic initiatives that would enrich students' learning environment. When the school was invited to participate in the TIME Collaborative, the team jumped at the chance. “Knowing that we've wanted to really have a deeper impact on students, we knew that more time — and the more flexible use of time — could only help us increase achievement and help us implement an expanded learning model,” Munro says.

SNAPSHOT OF CENTENNIAL: A SCHOOL FOR EXPEDITIONARY LEARNING (2012-2013)²



537

Total students



80%

Students of color



82%

Students qualifying for free or reduced lunch



17%

Students participating in English language support



11%

Growth record (according to DPS)

UNDERSTANDING THE TIME COLLABORATIVE

One of the most valuable resources in education is time and how it is used. Next generation learning environments intentionally use time to personalize learning, provide deeper interventions, and create learning opportunities beyond the classroom.

The TIME Collaborative is a partnership of the Ford Foundation and the National Center on Time & Learning (NCTL), the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), and The Colorado Education Initiative (CEI) to help three Colorado districts and 12 schools, including Centennial, rethink the role time plays in their learning environments.

These teams worked closely with NCTL, CEI, and CDE to design a school day and year that is personalized to the unique needs of their students and community. The redesign process involved technical assistance and targeted coaching with each school team. Plans focused on integrating NCTL's Seven Essential Elements for more and better learning time with school and district priorities.

1. *School Performance Framework, Denver Public Schools, undated. Available at http://testing.dpsk12.org/fusioncharts/spf/default.asp?chart=growthstatus_frLes.*

2. *“School Specific SPF – Elementary Schools,” School Performance Framework, Denver Public Schools, undated. Available at http://spf.dpsk12.org/spf_elementary.html.*

VISION AND GOALS

Centennial crafted a vision and goals for expanded learning time at the school that included:

- **Deeper impacts.** Ensure students were growing in literacy and math competency, and embarking on a lifelong love of learning.
- **Equal access to new opportunities.** Make opportunities and experiences available to all students.
- **Exciting enrichments.** Provide opportunities that both inspire and educate to get students out from behind the desk.
- **Self-discovery.** Empower students to decide what they want to learn by giving them plenty of avenues for self-discovery.

THE MODEL

To achieve its vision, Centennial's team divided each day's core academics into two areas of focus: humanities and math. By combining reading, writing, science, and social studies into humanities it allows students to dive deep into a multi-disciplinary learning experience and literacy becomes the vehicle for learning, Munro says. For example, kindergarteners spend an entire year studying insects. They work through case studies, read and write about insects, and participate in a yearlong project in which they create a book about an insect of their choice. These academic blocks are also used for expeditions in school and, as Centennial continues to evolve, will allow students to learn outside of school as well.

Next, the team added seven days to Centennial's school year. (As an innovation school, Centennial is allowed to waive certain union contract protocols, including teacher workday and the school calendar.) Two of these days were allotted to an annual staff retreat, where teachers participate in various trust-building activities, including a ropes course, in an off-campus setting that allows them to engage and learn like students do. "The retreat activities help us gain a higher level of trust," Munro says.

Centennial also supplemented its curriculum with enrichments in three key areas: adventure and fitness; humanities; and science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). Yoga, martial arts, coding, and robotics are among the enrichments offered every Wednesday afternoon. "We wanted a healthy mix of enrichments

ESTABLISHING A SUPPORTIVE CULTURE FOR TEACHERS

The Expeditionary Learning model also targeted staff by creating a culture focused on staff support and learning through various activities, including an annual two-day retreat for staff before the start of each school year. On a daily basis, professional development, data analysis, and collaboration are integrated into teacher's schedules. "Teachers have an hour block of planning every day," Munro says. "It's huge because most teachers are planning together, some individually. Our highest functioning teams are the ones that use that time collaboratively. We try to do that through example."

In addition to daily planning sessions, teachers have Wednesday afternoons for a deep dive into data and learning experiences. These sessions also allow leadership to check in on teachers' progress and problem-solve as issues arise.



that were super fun with underlying academics,” Munro says. “We wanted to give kids the opportunity to move and exercise, to play games and sports.”

To bring enrichments to Centennial, the staff partnered with DPS’ Office of Expanded Learning, which provided a vetted list of 25 community partners (see page 7). “Everybody we have asked to partner with us is awesome,” Munro says. “All of our partners have really worked out.”

While students are at enrichments led by community partners, teachers are collaborating. “One of our biggest goals was to create a really long chunk of time where teachers could come together for [professional development] and collaboration,” Munro says. “So instead of allowing time every day, we picked one day where teachers were here for three hours.”



EXPLORE THIS TOOLKIT

to learn how to incorporate community partners into your school.



WE ARE CREW, NOT PASSENGERS

According to Centennial’s website, all students and staff are “crew, not passengers,” referring to a group in a boat on a long voyage, where everyone is needed to pull at an oar and no one sits by watching.

“We strive to instill a sense of responsibility, participation, and cooperation among individuals, the student body, the school community, and the greater community,” Munro says. “This motto represents our commitment to inclusion and action in the service of self and others.” This outlook also allows the staff to focus on the whole child, she adds. “Sometimes in a traditional school, where staff is really pressed for time and the focus is just on academics, teachers feel stressed to build social, emotional, and character development. The [model] of Crew gives teachers and the whole school community permission to focus equally on social-emotional being and character.”

Crew’s impact. Three days a week, Centennial students begin the day in Crew. For 45 minutes, they play a game or participate in a trust-building, problem-solving, or collaboration activity to build community and work on social and emotional skills that they can apply for the rest of the day. “So often, kids can spend a whole year together and they may never call each other by name,” Munro says. Centennial’s model is focused on ensuring that doesn’t happen. “The teachers know kids well,” she says, and vice versa. “We call our teachers by our first names,” and teachers loop with students — following their kindergarten class to first grade and second to third. This year, Centennial also launched Community Circle, a monthly event led by a grade-level team where the entire school comes together and focuses on celebrations, for example, allowing a teacher to recognize publically a student who has overcome a challenge or achieved a goal.

RETHINKING TIME

Centennial leadership divided the school year into five eight-week sessions so that every eight weeks the schedule of enrichments changes. During the three-hour block, students rotate between three

enrichments. Staff currently chooses the enrichments for students, but in the future, students will have more voice in these decisions. Below are examples of teacher and student schedules at Centennial.

TYPICAL SCHEDULE FOR TEACHERS AT CENTENNIAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
Breakfast	☐ 15 min.	☐ 15 min.	☐ 15 min.	☐ 15 min.	☐ 15 min.
Morning Meeting	—	☐ 15 min.	—	☐ 15 min.	—
Crew	☐ 45 min.	—	☐ 45 min.	—	☐ 45 min.
Humanities	⊙ 180 min.	⊙ 180 min.	—	⊙ 180 min.	⊙ 180 min.
Expedition	—	—	⊙ 120 min.	—	—
Math	⊙ 105 min.	⊙ 105 min.	—	⊙ 105 min.	⊙ 105 min.
Science Lab	—	☐ 45 min.	—	—	—
Recess/Lunch	⊙ 60 min.	⊙ 60 min.	⊙ 60 min.	⊙ 60 min.	⊙ 60 min.
Planning	⊙ 60 min.	⊙ 60 min.	⊙ 60 min.	—	⊙ 60 min.
Data Team	—	—	⊙ 60 min.	⊙ 60 min.	—
Whole Staff PD	—	—	⊙ 60 min.	—	—



TYPICAL SCHEDULE FOR **FIRST-GRADERS** AT CENTENNIAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
8-8:15 a.m.	Breakfast in the Classroom				
8:15-8:30 a.m.	Crew	Morning Meeting	Crew	Morning Meeting	Crew
8:30-9 a.m.		Humanities		Humanities	
9-11 a.m.	Humanities	Humanities	Expedition	Humanities	Humanities
11 a.m.-12 p.m.	Recess and Lunch				
12:15-1:15 p.m.	Humanities	Science Lab	Enrichments Provided by Outside Partners	Humanities	Humanities
1:15-2:15 p.m.	Electives	Electives		Electives	Electives
2:15-3:45 p.m.	Math	Math		Math	Math



CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Implementing a new learning model and expanding the school day were not without challenges. Below

are some of the challenges Centennial experienced along with the solutions that staff created.

CHALLENGES	SOLUTIONS
Extend the school day by 45 minutes without incurring additional costs.	Worked with DPS to create a school day that allowed new bus schedules at the same price as previous school days.
Extend the school year to provide students more days in the classroom.	Turned five teacher in-service days into regular school days.
Provide more planning and professional development opportunities for teachers.	Found community partners who allowed teachers three hours of uninterrupted time every Wednesday in addition to the hour each day for regular planning.
Find great community partners.	Worked with DPS to develop unique partnerships with organizations such as the Denver Zoo and City Year.
Fund new enrichment activities with community partners.	Currently taking advantage of many grant opportunities, but plan to integrate all funding expenses into the traditional school budget within a few years.

PROOF OF IMPACT

Centennial has made remarkable progress in the past two years, but it is too soon to assess the impact expanded learning time has had on academic growth. There simply isn't enough quantifiable data, Munro says. But Centennial is seeing some promising trends. As of March 2015, the school had logged close to 4,000 volunteer hours — from community partners, families, and parents. “That’s double the total number of hours from the previous year,” she says.

“We also have observational data that the number of neighborhood students selecting Centennial as a viable school has definitely increased in our

primary grades,” Munro adds. Currently the kindergarten class has a wait list of 16 students for the 2015-2016 school year.

Students are more excited and engaged, teachers are more collaborative, and the community has become more supportive of the school and its students. Over the next few years, data will become more widely available, and the culture of curiosity, discovery, and opportunity will continue to grow and expand.

WHAT'S NEXT?

In only two years, a once struggling school has become an emerging model of success in expeditionary learning and expanded learning time. Centennial has designed several initiatives to continue making progress, including:

Improve communication between school and home. “A challenge for us has been communicating to parents everything our kids are doing,” Munro says. “Parents may ask, ‘How was your day?’ and a student will respond, ‘Great.’”

One of the goals for next year is to create end-of-session performances or celebrations within enrichments to allow parents and community members to see and appreciate the student growth that happens through the process.

Increase the use of technology. Centennial is focused on becoming more tech-enabled, especially to help staff measure impact and growth. The staff has begun to use the Achievement Network for data analytics to help evaluate successful practices and opportunities for improvement. “We’ve also made a commitment to beef up our laptops and access to mobile technology,” to expand students’ learning opportunities, Munro says.

ENRICHMENT PROVIDERS

Centennial collaborated with the following community partners to bring enrichments to students:

Provider	Content Area/Focus
Abakadoodle	Art
Alchemy in Action	Science/martial arts
Art for Life	Art
Artful Journey	Art
Brainiacs	STEM/LEGO robotics
Butterfly Pavilion	Science
Challenge Island	STEM
Chess Wizards	Chess
City Year	Learning activities
Cleo Parker Robinson Dance	Dance
Colorado Kids Camp	Physical education/sports
Creative Coding	Technology
Creative Strategies for Change	Social justice
Denver Center for the Performing Arts	Performing arts
Denver Zoo	Science
Environmental learning for Kids	Environmental science
Eurekus	STEAM
Gravity Dance	Dance
KidsTek	Technology
Kinder Kixx	Soccer
MindSpark	STEM
Omniform	Martial arts
Radiant Beginnings	Yoga
Science Matters	Science
Sticky Fingers Cooking	Cooking
Young Rembrandts	Art

THANK YOU

TO ALL THE CENTENNIAL STAFF, FAMILIES, COMMUNITY MEMBERS,
AND STUDENTS WHO SHARED THEIR STORIES WITH US.

YOU'RE AN INSPIRATION FOR WHAT
THE FUTURE OF LEARNING CAN HOLD.



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