

**EA 747 Program Evaluation Proposal**  
**Group: Chris Brockmon, Grayson McKinney, Tracy Raona**

**I. Title:** Examining the Impact of Departmentalized Teaching at the Elementary Level

**II. Background:**

**a. Overview of existing program or program description:**

Over the past decade, school districts all over the country have been adapting a practice that has long defined middle and high schools: departmentalization. Departmentalization of elementary classrooms, or subject specialization, is the process by which instructors begin to expertly teach students in one or two subject areas, as opposed to all subjects in a self-contained classroom. This practice, which is also referred to in the literature as “specializing” or “platooning”, was at first adopted because educational leaders thought it might help schools to raise scores on standardized, high stakes tests to appease the No Child Left Behind laws of 2002. Now, as the Common Core State Standards require higher order thinking skills from children as young as those in kindergarten, some schools are expanding the model by asking their teachers to step out of the traditional elementary teacher role as generalists, and serve instead as experts in only one or two content areas.

Lessenger Elementary in the Lamphere Schools is organized with a traditional grade level structure from grades kindergarten through fifth. In the spring of 2014, two of the second grade teachers approached the principal with a proposal for the departmentalization of the grade level, which was approved. The 2014-2015 school year was the initial year of implementation for departmentalization.

The teachers were motivated to change due to the increased expectations of expertise in each subject area taught by the traditional generalist elementary teacher. They felt that they would be better able to become experts in one to two subjects, thus providing higher quality instruction to all students in the grade level. An anticipated secondary result was that students would be more engaged due to each teacher's enthusiasm for her subject area, which would be evident in the culture of the classrooms.

This proposed change was a natural transition for these particular teachers in this particular grade level. During the previous two years, the teachers had implemented a modified version of a self-contained Response to Intervention (RTI) model for reading, resulting in three distinct rotations, which included the switching of students for science and social studies, ability grouped students for one and a half hours a week for on-level word study and phonics instruction, and shared guided reading groups by grouping students from across the grade-level, not just from within a single classroom.

The teachers divided the program content areas as follows:

*Teacher A:* math and science

*Teacher B:* writing and word study

*Teacher C:* reading and social studies

Each teacher selected the subjects about which she felt most passionately, and with which she'd had the most success in the past. The third section of second grade was vacant, due to a building placement transfer, which created the opportunity to hire a teacher especially qualified for the reading position. A teacher with experience as both a classroom teacher and a reading coach/interventionist was hired to complete the team.

The teachers met throughout the summer prior to beginning to collaborate and make preparations. They researched departmentalization, looking at both the pros and cons. The research showed that at the onset parents had concerns about the social and emotional readiness of young elementary students moving from teacher to teacher throughout the day. The teachers made it a primary focus to alleviate potential stress caused by switching classes, build relationships between each group of students with each teacher, and to build a sense of community across the grade level. They committed to a mind-set that each second grade student belonged to each of them, regardless of homeroom class lists.

Conversation was also necessary to create consensus on teacher language, expectations, guiding principles, and policies and procedures. As a result, the teachers appealed to their administration with special requests. Most importantly, they requested that 2nd grade receive the right of preferred scheduling of specials classes. Specials included physical education, music, art, Chinese, and technical literacy. In order to have enough time to dedicate to each subject area block, common classroom instruction time was needed. Second grade specials were scheduled after 2:00 pm, each day of the week, with one exception which the teachers were able to work around. They also requested tables in place of student desks. Each classroom was outfitted with six four-person tables. The intention was to create the feeling of shared space and reduce the sense of ownership over a particular desk or classroom teacher. The absence of desks did require teachers to create space and organization systems for storing students' belongings and supplies.

Parents in the school community were accepting of the alternative approach that the second grade team had come to offer. The second grade parents were notified of the shift to departmentalize a week before school began. The principal sent a letter home to the families and

the teachers spread enthusiasm by casually talking with parents. Curriculum Night for parents was held in the evening, after the second day of school, at which time teachers shared their excitement and detailed the possibilities of the departmentalized approach. The teachers also developed a parent handbook that addressed the goals of the reorganization and potential concerns and questions, which was also distributed at the parent open house.

The schedule was designed for students to switch from classroom to classroom five days a week for three one-hour and fifteen minute subject area class periods. Each teacher was assigned her homeroom of students, with a traditional class list. Students reported to their homeroom teacher in the morning to get unpacked, take attendance, place lunch orders, and turn in notes from home, while they settled in and practiced their handwriting. Twenty minutes into the day, the first subject area instruction begins. On most days, each class started their first subject area rotation with their homeroom teacher. However, due to the scheduling of specials classes, the rotation was not consistent every day.

After one hour and fifteen minutes, the teacher signaled for students to gather their binder and book box to travel to the next class. Students lined up in number order, as they had each been assigned a number. Each classroom had a hallway door and were situated in consecutive order within the same hallway. Teacher A and Teacher B also had an adjoining internal door. This lent itself very well to monitoring the flow of traffic. The transition schedule had been designed so that the classes would move in a circular direction. Class A entered Classroom B through the adjoining doors, while Class B exited through the hallway door, heading to Classroom C. Class C departed their hallway door and would enter the hallway door of

Classroom A. A five minute transition time was built into the schedule, which spanned between the time students started to gather their things to the time they would be seated in the next class.

The structure of the daily schedule allotted time for students to be with their homeroom teacher for teacher read alouds, handwriting practice, book check-out, housekeeping items, community building routines, and character development lessons. The homeroom teacher was also the first point of contact for parents with questions or concerns. Classroom routines and procedures, student jobs, behavior expectations, and behavior charts and consequences had all been standardized across the three classrooms. Each class had a teacher binder that traveled with them as a teacher record of student behavior, social, emotional, or physical concerns that had arisen that day. This allowed for the teachers to attend to the emotional needs of the young students and build consistency through teacher communication.

Each teacher would complete report card grades for the subject areas in which she instructed, as well as provide a subject area comment for each of the sixty-eight students. Parent-teacher conferences were held with the homeroom teacher. The three teachers were provided one-day of release time, prior to conferences, to summarize the subject area progress and concerns for each student so that each was able to conduct a comprehensive conference with the parents of their homeroom students.

**b. Purposes of the proposed evaluation:**

- The evaluation is being requested by the Lessenger principal and the second grade teachers.
- Our assumption at the onset of evaluating departmentalization is that because the teachers delivering the content to students are specialists, students' test scores and level of

achievement will increase. Additionally, because the teachers are focused and passionate about what they're teaching, students' attitudes will also reflect a more positive outlook on their own learning. Ultimately, we want to determine if departmentalized instruction raises test scores.

- Evaluation is being requested to determine if departmentalized instruction improves student achievement. The results will determine the continuation or abandonment of the program. We will also be looking for unintended consequences of departmentalizing the elementary curriculum, based on feedback from all stakeholders.
- The program will be evaluated during the course of the 2015-2016 school year, which will be the second year in which the departmentalized approach was implemented. Data from the first year of implementation will also be available.
- Resources used for evaluation will include Fountas and Pinnell reading assessment data, Northwest Education Assessment (NWEA) reading and math assessment data, and student and parent survey results.
- The program can be evaluated once the data from the student assessments is collected, analyzed, and disseminated. The purpose of the evaluation has been determined, the intended goals of the program are feasible, and the teachers and administrator of the program are interested in the impact and improvement of departmentalization.

### **III. Methods**

#### **a. Literature review results:**

Student performance has become the focus of every school district across the nation.

School districts have been compelled to examine the methods of instruction and how to best

achieve high student performance, based on standardized tests. A popular trend in the elementary schools, specifically grades 3-5, that closely mirrors middle and high schools, is departmentalization, also known as specializing or "platooning" (Education Week 2014). In this model, students have multiple teachers, instead of the traditional one teacher per class ratio. For instance, the students would start the day with Teacher "A" for homeroom, for English Language Arts (ELA), and possibly Social Studies. The students would then move to teacher "B" for Math and Science.

One of the ideas behind departmentalization is that it allows teachers who are experts in certain subjects areas to produce excellent results because they are able to focus on particular and fewer subject areas. This also allows for more planning time for the teacher because they are planning for fewer subject areas, allowing more time to be spent focusing on the elevating the lesser number of subject areas they are teaching (opportunityculture.org, 2012). When teachers believe in their own ability to teach effectively and help students to reach their goals, it has a positive impact on student achievement (as cited in Chang, 2009, p.197). According to the literature, departmentalization fosters this feeling of self-efficacy within teachers as they become experts in their subject areas. Furthermore, departmentalization improves instructional style, increases state test achievement, improves use of instructional time and increases teachers' positive attitude toward the subjects they teach (Strohl, Schmertzing, & Schmertzing, 2014).

Despite this fact, it is said that "decision makers in elementary schools unwilling to transition to departmentalized teaching from the traditional structure generally believe student-centered instruction is more beneficial than a more subject-centered model." (Strohl, Schmertzing, & Schmertzing, 2014). Self-contained classroom teachers have more flexibility in

their scheduled day than do departmentalization teachers (Elkind, 1988). They are also able to differentiate instruction based on their students needs better, according to Culyer (1984), because self-contained teachers know the ability of their students in all subject areas (as cited in McGrath & Rust, 2002). However, this could be alleviated with deliberate, focused and intentional collaboration amongst all of the students' teachers. This collaboration could also foster bonds and enhance professional relationships between the teachers. Furthermore, teachers who platoon have a broader view of subject areas because of vertical articulation (Delviscio and Muffs 2007).

Another argument against departmentalization could be made that the bond between the students and their teachers is not as easily formed in departmentalized classrooms as in self-contained classrooms with one teacher. However, Bishop Dunn Memorial School in Newburgh, N.Y. solves this problem by looping the departmentalized classroom teachers and students for three years. Teachers spend less time reviewing and assessing the ability of students each new school year, therefore, creating more instructional time and continuity in instruction for three years. The continuity in instruction will be beneficial regarding state assessments because teachers have the opportunity to examine and review developing strengths and unresolved weaknesses (Delviscio and Muffs 2007).

While departmentalization as a system is not without its problems, the same could be said (and often is) about self-contained classrooms. According to our research, it seems that departmentalization could be the solution to many issues that plague the educational system. Higher student achievement, less teacher burnout, increased teacher collaboration, and professional dialogue between teachers are all advantages of departmentalization. When combined with looping, better vertical articulation, continuity in instruction, more time dedicated



to instruction, and better insight into students strengths and weaknesses concerning state assessment make departmentalization combined with looping an enticing approach to education in the elementary setting.

**b. Type of evaluation and rationale:**

Type: Outcome

Approach: Objectives

Purpose: Systematic Decision-Making

**c. Methods of Data Collection:**

Information required:

- Surveys
- Fountas & Pinnell Reading Assessment
- Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) - Measure of Academic Progress (MAP)

Sources of Information:

- Classroom teachers
- students
- parents

Styles of Information Collected:

- Single-group, naturalistic

**d. Methods of Data Analysis:**

- Teacher, student, and parent surveys will be distributed and analyzed to determine perception and attitude of the program
- Fountas & Pinnell Reading Assessments will be administered four times a year to determine growth over time; the running record forms and student books will be compared to other students data from the other schools in the district and the students'

previous years' scores will be compared to scores after program implementation to determine success of the program

- Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA)/Measure of Academic Progress(MAP) will be administered three times yearly, the summary reports will be analyzed to determine growth in Reading and Math; the summary reports will be compared to previous years' scores to determine growth within the program

**e. Sample data collection instruments:**

- Surveys
- Copy of F&P Running Record form and student book
- NWEA Sample questions and Summary Reports

**IV. Anticipated Outcomes:**

The multiple anticipated outcomes of this program evaluation are related to the impact of departmentalized teaching specifically at the elementary level. Student growth, achievement as determined by test scores, relationships among students and with teachers, and student attitude about school are anticipated to be significant indicators of the success of this program. Teacher self-efficacy, professional development, professional expertise, relationships with students, co-workers and parents, passion for teaching, and time spent preparing for teaching are also contributing factors to the success of this program. Finally, and just as important, are the parents' perceptions of the program's outcomes. These indicators will be monitored, assessed, evaluated, examined, and analyzed to determine the degree of success of departmentalized teaching. We are confident that once the program evaluation is complete, the impact concerning all stakeholders will be positive. Furthermore, this program evaluation could lead to other elementary schools in this district and other districts to pilot and eventually implement departmentalized teaching.

## REFERENCES

Chang, M. L. (2009). An appraisal perspective of teacher burnout: Examining the emotional work of teachers. *Educational Psychology Review*, 21, 193-218. Doi: 10.1007/s10648-009-9106-y.

Culyer, R. C. (1984). The case for the self-contained classroom. *The Clearing House*, 57, 417-419. Doi: 10.2307/30194990.

Elkind, E. (1988). Rotation at an early age. *Principal*, 67(5), 11-13.

James J. Delviscio and Michael L. Muffs (Sept 2007). Regrouping students: to lessen accountability pressures on teachers, a school pilots a looping and departmentalization model in the elementary grades. *School Administrator*. 64, 26.

Opportunityculture.org (2012) public impact; Redesigning Schools: Models to reach every student with excellent teachers; subject Specialization (elementary) .

'Platooning' on the Rise in Early Grades. *Education Week* (Feb 2014): Section 1: pg. 1: vol. 33 No. 21.

Strohl, Alecia; Schmertzing, Lorraine; Schmertzing, Richard (Sept 2014) Elementary teachers' experiences and perceptions of departmentalized instruction: A case study. *Journal of Case Studies in Education*, 1-18.