

# How to Build an Elementary Master Schedule That Unlocks Opportunities to Raise Achievement and Improve Equity



District  
Management  
Group



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## Why You Should Approach Your Schedule As An Important Strategic Tool



**In all elementary schools, time is a valuable and scarce resource.** There are only so many hours in a school day, and numerous priorities compete against one another for precious minutes.

Making the most of the time you have is critical, yet schools and districts rarely give the same level of scrutiny to how they allocate time resources as they do to how they allocate monetary resources. While school schedules are created with the best intentions, the enormous complexity of the task often results in schedules that operate as uncomfortable compromises between undesirable trade-offs. The good news is that this can be fixed with a strategic approach to scheduling.

**By treating schedule creation as strategically important and dedicating collective expertise to the task, districts build schedules that are worthy of awe and appreciation,** bring current practices in line with best practices, and unlock the potential to raise student achievement and improve educational equity.

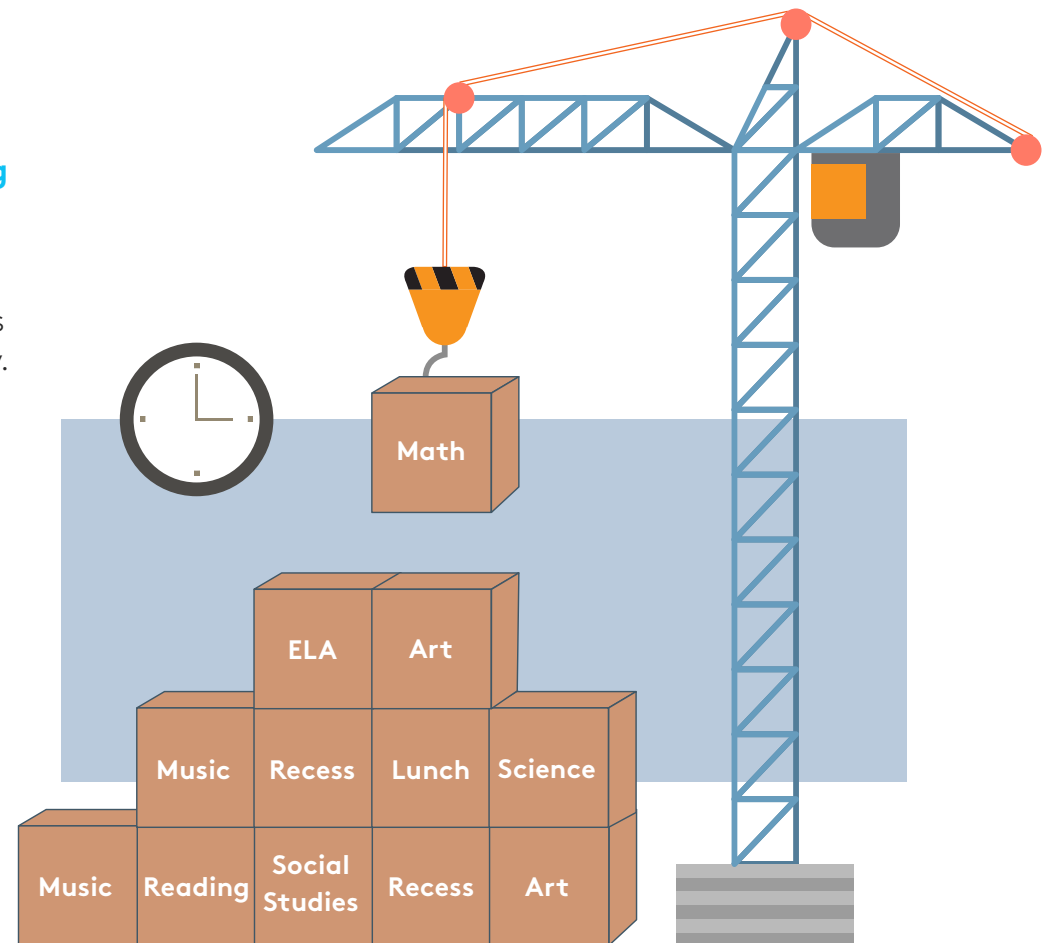
## How Building Your Elementary Master Schedule Strategically Contributes To Raising Achievement

All too often, schedules can unintentionally squander precious learning time and become a barrier to implementing instructional priorities designed to improve teaching and learning.

On the other hand, **a strategic approach to scheduling can make the previously impossible possible and unlock opportunities to raise achievement.**

With the right approach you can build a schedule that reflects best practices without adding more hours to the school day. A schedule that raises achievement does the following:

- ▶ Ensures 90 minutes of uninterrupted time for reading and 60 minutes for math.
- ▶ Prevents students from being pulled out of core instruction.
- ▶ Implements a daily intervention and enrichment block.
- ▶ Provides adequate time to support struggling students.
- ▶ Creates opportunities for common planning time for grade-level classroom teachers.



## How Building Your Elementary Master Schedule Strategically Improves Equity

All schools and districts strive to provide equitable access for students to specials classes (such as music and art), to specialized staff and support services (such as reading teachers, behaviorists, and psychologists), to intervention and enrichment, and more.

**A strategic approach to creating elementary master building schedules can help improve equity across the board. With the right approach, you can build a schedule that:**

- ▶ Makes consistent the amount of core instruction received across classrooms, grades, and schools.
- ▶ Improves consistency of how time is spent by teachers when not with students.
- ▶ Ensures struggling students are working with the most expert staff.
- ▶ Ensures students are receiving services at the most appropriate times in the schedule.
- ▶ Delivers equitable access to specials across classrooms, grades, and schools.





## Why Is Scheduling Strategically So Difficult? Because Scheduling Is Complex.

School scheduling is a challenging task. In fact, it requires creating **not only a single schedule but dozens of interconnected staff schedules, each influenced by the master building schedule.** Competing, unranked priorities from a diverse set of stakeholders further exacerbate the problem, causing uncomfortable choices and trade-offs when goals conflict.

Despite this complexity, the person responsible for scheduling at the elementary school level is rarely someone with deep scheduling expertise; the task is often left to a principal or assistant principal to do the best they can. And while schools at the secondary level often have access to scheduling software, elementary school leaders are typically left to tackle this complex task with rudimentary technology and without specialized scheduling knowledge. Even for expert schedulers, iterating on manually built schedules is time-consuming and burdensome, making it challenging to consider alternatives. There is a better way. Approaching school scheduling strategically and arming your team with best practices knowledge can enable you to overcome these obstacles.

## You Can Build An Effective Elementary Master Schedule By Following These Six Steps.

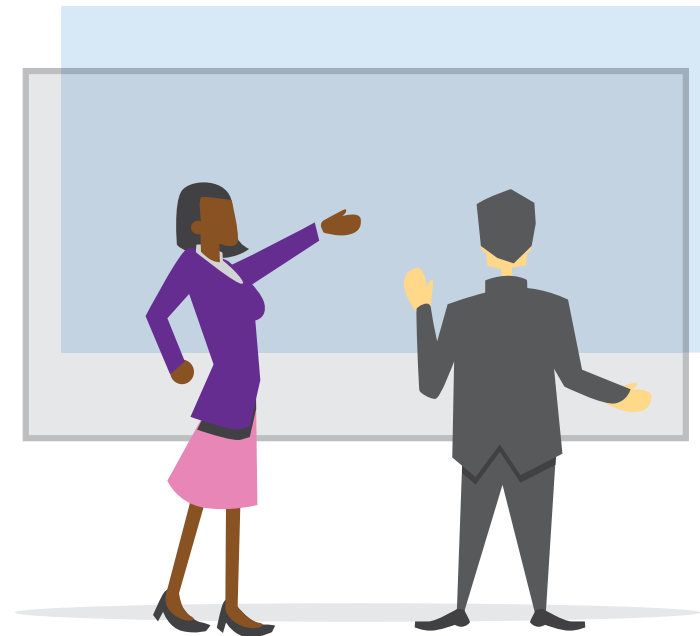
Strategic scheduling drives results without adding staff or lengthening the school day. But to successfully build better, more strategic schedules, you'll need to approach scheduling as a team sport.

**By building your schedule according to the following steps, your district can produce a schedule that better achieves benefits for students and teachers.**

### Step 1: Set Priorities

Stakeholders must first establish instructional guidelines for the following:

- ▶ What subjects will be offered at each grade level?
- ▶ What is the duration expected for each period?
- ▶ When is it permissible for support staff to pull out or push in?



These baseline considerations are the foundation of your schedule. From here, stakeholders can further develop the details of their elementary master schedule.

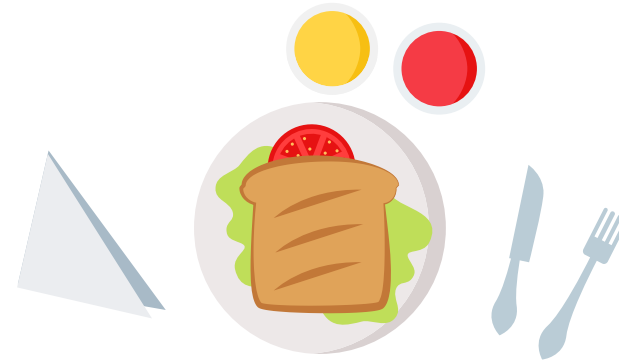
Once Priorities Are Agreed Upon, Start Laying Out Schedule Blocks.  
Remember: Sequence Is Important!



### Step 2: Schedule Specials

When specials for a given grade are scheduled at the same time and for the same duration, they create opportunities for grade-level common planning time for classroom teachers, which are immensely valuable for planning and collaboration.

Staggering specials by grade ensures that the same teachers can cover each grade sequentially throughout the day. Plus, when specials for older grades are scheduled for early in the day, there's more time for core instruction in the morning for younger students, an established best practice.



### Step 3: Schedule Lunch and Recess

Once specials are scheduled, it's time to move on to lunch and recess. This allows districts to work within the capacity of their cafeteria and the limited window within which all lunch and recess periods must fit. In addition, scheduling lunch and recess consecutively reduces fragmentation and interruptions during the rest of the school day.



## Next, Schedule Core Instruction, Intervention and Enrichment, and Remaining Subjects

### Step 4: Schedule Core Instruction— Reading and Math

Next, schedule core instruction periods according to school and district instructional guidelines. **All students of the same grade should have the same schedule for core instruction.** Moreover, districts ought to avoid overlapping core instruction blocks across grades, as this approach creates “dead zones” for support staff to pull out students. Third-grade core instruction, for example, should not occur at the same time as fifth-grade core instruction, and so on. Instead, stagger these blocks throughout the day.

### Step 5: Schedule Intervention and Enrichment

Then, move on to scheduling intervention and enrichment (I&E) blocks. **Staggering I&E blocks across grades frees up specialized staff to cover all grade levels.** Likewise, scheduling I&E blocks at the same time for all classrooms within a grade facilitates cross-classroom flexible grouping.

### Step 6: Schedule Remaining Subjects, Then Make Adjustments

At this point, the master building schedule is almost done, but stakeholders may need to compromise to fit in the last pieces of the puzzle. Begin by scheduling any remaining subjects. Then make any necessary adjustments, letting the instructional guidelines you established in Step 1 guide any changes.

As you finalize the schedule, try to ensure that, at all times throughout the day, at least one or two grades have appropriate scheduled time when students can be pulled out for special education and related services without compromising your guidelines.

## Approaching Scheduling As A Team Sport Will Yield Better Results

### Part I: Master Building Schedules

In many districts, the master building schedule and individual staff schedules are constructed independently even though they are deeply interconnected. **Approaching scheduling as a team sport instead – bringing principals and teachers together to collaboratively build schedules – will result in collective learning that creates better, more student-centered schedules.**

By bringing teachers into the discussion of priorities, trade-offs and constraints, this approach also provides opportunity to cultivate understanding for the schedule design.



# Approaching Scheduling As A Team Sport Will Yield Better Results

## Part II: Staff Schedules

The master schedule is just one piece of the puzzle. **Each elementary school also has dozens of individual staff schedules that are interconnected and influenced by the master schedule.**

This is an opportunity disguised as a challenge. When core teachers, specialists, interventionists and others come together to build their schedules, new possibilities unfold. Collaboration ensures that all schedules work together and are centered around teaching and learning best practices. And when everyone comes to the table at the same time, it's easier for individuals to see and comprehend how the master schedule impacts their individual schedules, not to mention how their schedules affect the bigger picture.



## Your Elementary Master Scheduling Roadmap

A strategic approach to building elementary schedules is essential to creating opportunities to raise achievement, expand services, and improve equity. By leveraging these six steps, approaching scheduling as a team sport, and making use of available technology to iterate and explore different scenarios, stakeholders can realize their collective goals without lengthening the school day or hiring additional staff.

With 70-80% of school district budgets dedicated to staff and staff time, no school or district can afford not to approach the schedule strategically. Doing so will make the most of limited resources and do the most good for the most students.

Building effective school schedules is a complex endeavor. **By following these best practices, you can achieve success.**



**If your district needs professional assistance to  
build a better schedule, contact the experts at  
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Management  
Group**

133 Federal Street, Boston MA 02110

1-877-362-3500

[info@dmgroupK12.com](mailto:info@dmgroupK12.com)

[\*\*dmgroupK12.com\*\*](http://dmgroupK12.com)