

# Designing Strategic Elementary Schedules

A HOW-TO GUIDE



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# Introduction

This guide is designed to help turn typical elementary schedules into strategic elementary schedules. What's the difference? Strategic schedules help ensure teaching and learning best practices guide every decision made while building the schedule.

Every elementary school, every year builds a new master schedule and they all “work” fine. This means every student gets lunch and the cafeteria isn't overloaded, art, music, PE and other specials are scheduled every day and classroom teachers have a good idea of how much time to spend on morning meeting, reading and so on. So, why shift from typical schedules to strategic schedules? Because unlike a schedule that “works” (all the basics are covered), a strategic schedule can lead to dramatic gains in student achievement and improved equity.

A schedule is a means to an end, not an end in and of itself. The work of researcher John Hattie, the What Works Clearing House, the National Reading Panel, and the experience of achievement gap-closing schools paint a clear, undisputed picture of some key teaching and learning practices that should drive the development of elementary master schedules. These teaching and learning best practices are deeply intertwined with elementary schedules. How blocks of time are laid out in the schedule greatly influence whether, and if, these best practices can take place. Read on and learn how to build strategic elementary schedules. *To learn even more, contact us at [info@newsolutionsk12.com](mailto:info@newsolutionsk12.com)*

## About New Solutions K12

New Solutions K12 helps school and district leaders address their biggest challenges and cost-effectively raise student achievement while improving equity. We believe that best practices and a shift from past practice can serve students, teachers, parents, and taxpayers well and lead to a better future for our children. Our team of consultants and experienced district leaders combines decades of on-the-ground experience with evidence-based research to help leaders not only understand what works, but also how to implement new solutions successfully in schools.



## 1

# What Makes an Elementary Schedule Strategic?

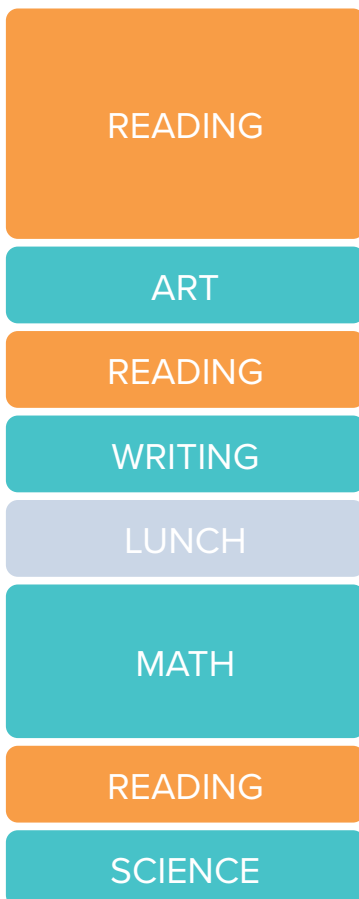
## 1A. Provide at least 90 minutes of reading and 60 minutes of math daily

The research is clear: elementary students need at least 90 minutes of reading each day and 60 minutes of math each day. And, there are best practices that can ensure students fully benefit from those precious minutes:

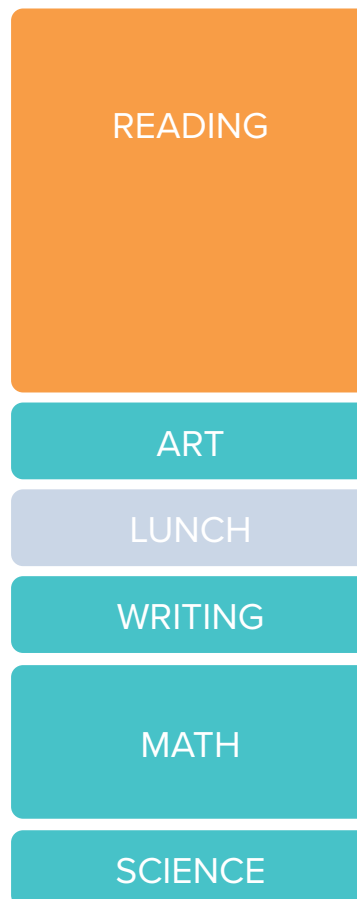
### Ensure core reading and math blocks are uninterrupted

Reading and math core blocks should be uninterrupted time for student learning. In many schools, however, core instruction is split into 30- or 45-minute chunks to fit in specials, lunch, recess, and other classes. Schools with best-practice schedules designate math and reading time as blocks of uninterrupted time, as shown below.

Common Practice Schedule



Best Practice Schedule



**And remember: writing is different than reading. Time to learn writing should be in addition to time dedicated for reading.**



### Avoid scheduling pull-out services during core reading and math

Nearly all students, including students with mild to moderate disabilities, should receive 100 percent of core instruction in reading and math. Students will never master current year material if they are not in the room while it is being taught. The extra help and services they receive should be extra—in addition too, not instead of, core instruction.

### Stagger reading and math blocks across grades

In some schools, all classes teach reading right after morning meeting and many teach math just before lunch. If everyone teaches math and reading at the same time, then special educators, reading teachers, and speech therapists do not have a choice but to pull some students during these not-to-be-missed periods. These specialists cannot have hours each day when all their students are unavailable. Staggering reading and math protects core reading and math instruction and makes the most of specialists' time in the school day.

## 1B. Create a detailed micro-schedule for reading block

Nearly all elementary master schedules show when reading should be taught. This is usually a big chunk of time, 90 or 120 minutes or more, that proclaims the importance of reading. This is good, but it is not enough. Strategic schedules include a micro-schedule for the reading block as a guide for teachers to ensure students universally access and benefit from best practices.

### Sample micro-schedule for reading block

Below is a sample micro-schedule for a reading block. Schools and districts should develop their own micro-schedule aligned to the reading programming and curriculum.

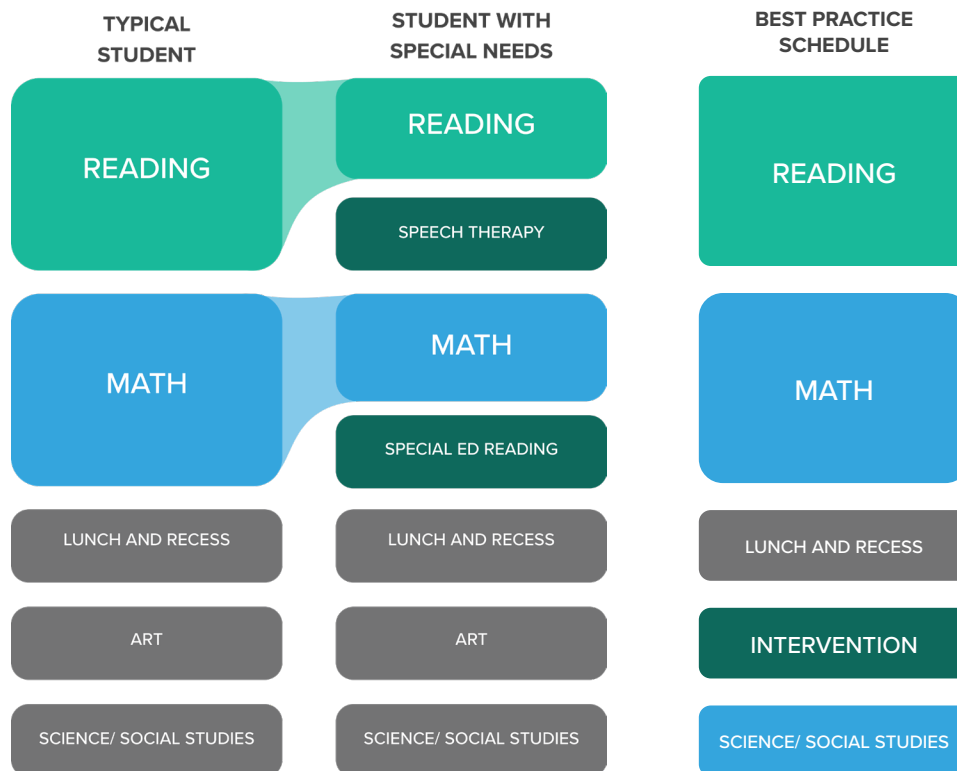
Activity	Minutes
Whole group read aloud	15
Word study	10
Direct phonics instruction	20
Small group work (rotation)	45
Group 1: Decoding/fluency w/ teacher	
Group 2: Individual/buddy reading	
Group 3: Vocabulary building	
Total	90

## 1C. Provide daily, high-quality intervention for at least 30 minutes

**Ensure 30 minutes daily reading intervention (in addition to standard 90 minutes) for students who need it**

Even before the disruption caused by COVID pandemic, far too many students struggled to read. These students need at least 30 minutes a day of reading intervention with a skilled reading teacher beyond 90 minutes of core reading instruction. There are many ways to find the needed 30 minutes: some schools alternate science and social studies every other day, and others shorten lunch, recess, or specials.

Struggling students should receive extra support in addition to (and not instead of) their regular instruction. Scheduling a daily extra-time intervention and enrichment block of at least 30 minutes enables schools to provide this extra time. As the graphic below shows, creating a designated extra-time intervention period allows students to remain in and benefit from core instruction by avoiding pull-out for services.



### Ensure content-strong teachers provide intervention

Who provides extra help to students matters—a lot. Highly skilled teachers with subject-specific training, interest, and aptitude are the most effective.

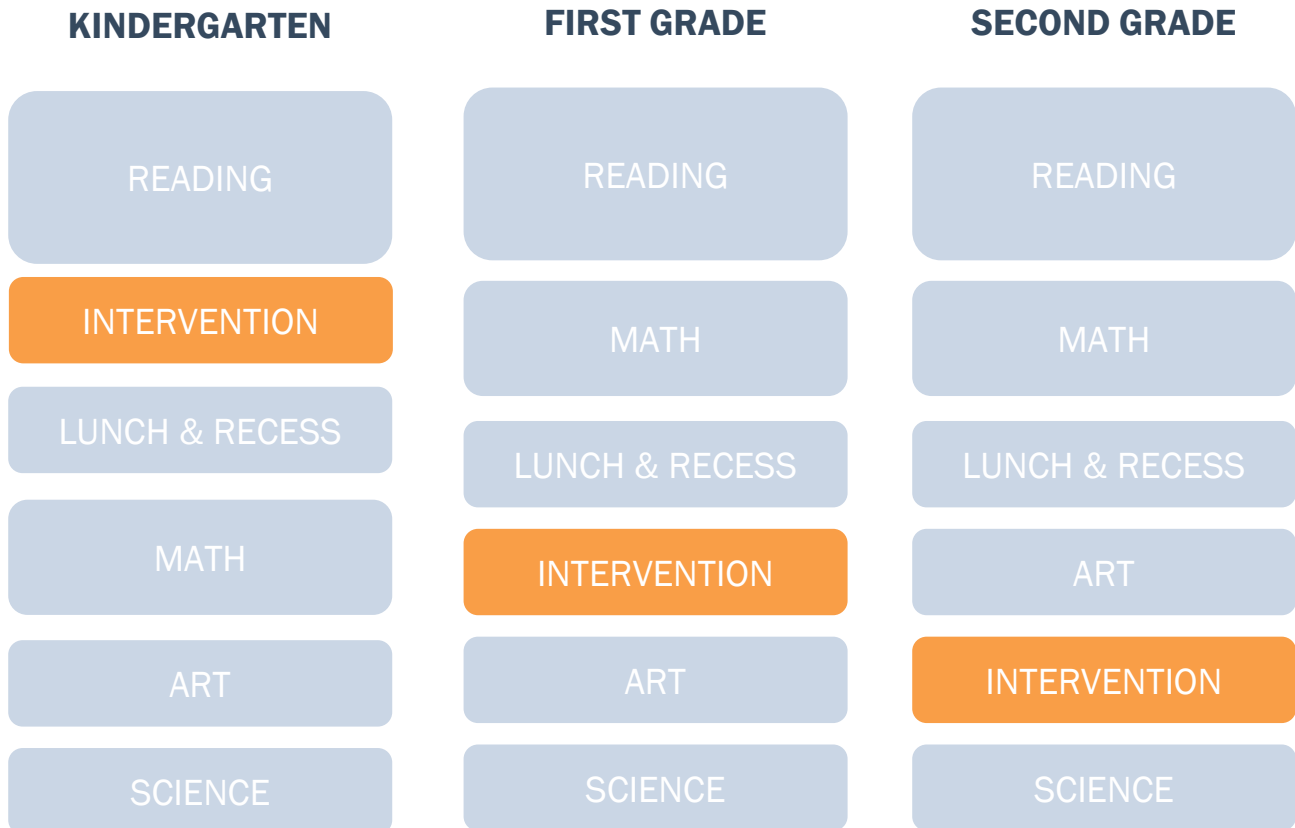
Additional intervention and enrichment time should pair struggling students with staff that have the most content expertise (literacy specialists, math interventionists, etc.). While generalists can provide general academic support, like homework help or reviewing quiz questions, only content-strong staff can:

- Infer student misunderstandings from incorrect answers
- Associate each incorrect answer with underlying concepts
- Expertly select prior, fundamental skills to teach
- Reteach material using new and different approaches

### Stagger intervention and enrichment blocks across grades

Staggering grade-level intervention blocks allows content-strong staff to support more students. If the whole school has intervention at the same time, then 250 or even 450 or more students will need extra help at once. Some intervention groups will inevitably be supported by paraprofessionals because there are not enough certified staff available to cover all the intervention groups. Not only is this not a best practice, but it is also a long-standing cause of inequity as well.

The graphic below shows how to stagger intervention and enrichment blocks to ensure equal access to intervention for all students at each grade level.



### Group intervention by area of need

Scheduling intervention at the same time within a grade allows teachers and interventionists to flexibly re-group students according to individual needs across classrooms. If five students struggle with phonics across four classrooms, for example, scheduling the intervention block by grade level allows the interventionist to pull students with similar needs at the same time to work on common skills. A reading intervention block will be more impactful if everyone in the group has the same focus area, such as phonics or fluency, and much less impactful if there are multiple areas of focus, such as some students working on phonics while others are working on fluency.

#### ACROSS FOUR CLASSROOMS, FIVE STUDENTS ARE STRUGGLING WITH PHONICS



### Avoid relying on before- or after-school intervention

A far too common so-called solution to finding time for intervention is to offer it before or after school. Before and after school intervention does not rock the boat, but it does throw a lot of students, metaphorically of course, out of the boat. Too many students have transportation limitations or other obligations that prevent them from coming to school early or staying late. For historically underserved students, this becomes just one more unintended injustice that holds them back.

## 1D. Create dedicated time for SEL and building relationships

Many schools do not carve out dedicated time in the schedule for social-emotional learning (SEL) or relationship building, despite proclaiming the importance of both. Instead, it is more common to ask teachers to “weave it in” whenever they can, despite an already packed curriculum. Designate time for SEL and building relationships in the form of morning meeting, community circle, or advisory to ensure students and staff have time to build relationships outside of academics.



## 1E. Ensure grade-level common planning time

Scheduling specials at the same time across each grade while staggering specials for different grades throughout the day provides a bonus benefit: automatic common planning time. Teachers planning together, when done well, can help improve teaching and learning. When specials are common across a grade level, so are teacher preparation periods. This provides time for grade-level teachers to plan together as well.

Common planning time should be used to facilitate professional learning and collaboration among teachers. Common benefits for staff and teachers include:

- Review data to drive instruction
- Facilitate collaborative lesson planning
- Create time for teachers to discuss assessments, identify interventions, and group students according to need
- Provide opportunity for teachers to learn from talented and veteran colleagues

## 1F. Ensure total minutes of recommended time blocks equals length of school day

There is great value in writing down exactly how the blocks of time during the day should be used. It might seem obvious, but this step is often skipped or there is no agreement. There is so much to do each day and so little time to do it. Strategic schedules are realistic and never ask for more than what is possible. Before starting to build a schedule, make this simple chart:

- 1 List every time block that is desired to schedule and do not forget to include writing, SEL, morning meeting, or anything else that takes dedicated time.
- 2 List how many minutes should be allocated for each block.
- 3 Add up all the minutes and compare to the length of the official school day.

## 2

# Strategic Elementary Schedule Self-Assessment

Elementary Scheduling Best Practice	Does your schedule include these best practices?		
	Yes, Definitely	Sometimes	No, Not Really
1. Totaled minutes of the recommended time blocks equals the length of the school day			
2. Reading and math time blocks align to curriculum developer's recommendations			
3. Micro-schedules for reading blocks			
4. Reading and math are staggered throughout the day			
5. 30 minutes of intervention daily			
6. Intervention is common across a grade level			
7. Intervention is staggered throughout the day			
8. No before-school or after-school intervention			
9. Dedicated time for SEL and building relationships			
10. Specials (art, music, PE etc.) are scheduled to allow for the first nine best practices			

# 3 Approaching the Scheduling Process Strategically

## 3A. Approach building the schedule as a team sport

Building a great schedule is hard. No one person has all the wisdom, expertise, authority, and data to build the best schedule by themselves. Changing a schedule can be politically challenging, and excluding teachers from the discussions often undermines support for a new, even better schedule. Building schedules as a team can help align schedules to priorities and ensure that they meet the needs of students and staff.



### A SCHEDULING TEAM SHOULD INCLUDE:

#### School Principal

- Sets overall scheduling direction, goals, and priorities
- Works closely with assistant superintendent of teaching and learning to align on vision

#### Guidance Counselor / Assistant Principal

- Manages logistics of scheduling process and keeps things on track

#### General Education Teacher(s)

- Provides input on scheduling decisions and tradeoffs from the perspective of general education instruction

#### Special Education Teacher

- Provides input on scheduling decisions and tradeoffs from the perspective of student supports

#### Expert Scheduler

- Uses scheduling software to build student and teacher schedules
- Note: may be school-based or district-based

#### Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning

- Sets overall direction, goals, and priorities for schedules across schools in the district
- Removes obstacles, clarifies constraints
- Provides scheduling guidelines and parameters

Taking a team approach to scheduling provides the benefit and opportunity to leverage staff expertise across roles and content areas, create a shared understanding of priorities, and focus on creating a schedule driven by student need.

## 3B. Set clear priorities and non-negotiables to guide the scheduling process

A set of clear goals, priorities, and non-negotiables can help transform the schedule to become a tool for truly and positively impacting teaching and learning.

Scheduling teams should first assess and collect feedback on the current schedule to inform potential priorities. They should then establish a small set of “must-have” and “nice-to-have” priorities to guide the schedule. Ultimately, the scheduling team should drive towards establishing a set of 3-5 specific priorities based on the school’s need to help drive the scheduling design process.

### Sample priorities include:

- Create at least 90 minutes of daily uninterrupted reading instruction
- Build in at least 30 minutes of extra-time built for academic intervention
- Students are not pulled from core instruction for special education services

## 3C. Utilize scheduling expertise to build the schedule

Designing a schedule takes a different set of skills than building a schedule. Expert schedulers can help ensure student needs and requests are met, that staff are used efficiently, and that the schedule aligns with leaders’ vision and priorities. An expert scheduler should be intimately familiar with any scheduling software, tools, or process and be very familiar with goals and priorities established by the scheduling team.



## 3D. Train and support staff on how to make the most of the schedule

The final key step strategic scheduling teams take is to ensure teachers and staff are well trained and supported to implement the schedule as intended and effectively. If creating a new intervention period, for example, be sure to codify and share the vision for how it should be used, both from the student perspective as well as the teacher perspective.

# 4 Scheduling Process Self-Assessment

Scheduling Process Best Practice	Does your scheduling process include this practice?		
	Yes, Definitely	Somewhat	No, Not Really
1. Establish a school-based scheduling team			
2. Assess and collect feedback on the current schedule			
3. Establish a set of 3-5 specific priorities			
4. Identify other non-negotiables and constraints			
5. Enlist an expert scheduler			
6. Prioritize what is scheduled first e.g., specials, common block times, core			
7. Train staff on new schedule components			



# 5 A Step by Step Process

## 1 Create a scheduling team

Build a scheduling team to leverage staff expertise, create shared priorities, and focus on student needs. A scheduling team should include:

- School principal
- Guidance counselor/assistant principal
- General education teacher(s)
- Special education teacher
- Expert scheduler
- Assistant superintendent of teaching and learning

## 2 Establish scheduling priorities and non-negotiables

Establish a set of 3-5 specific, measurable priorities based on the school's need to help drive the scheduling design process. Identify other non-negotiables or schedule constraints such as teacher contract and course-hour requirements.

## 3 Draft instructional minutes for each class by grade level

Use scheduling priorities to determine the instructional minutes for each class by grade level. Set specific targets for minutes for each subject (i.e. 90 minutes of reading, 60 minutes of math.) Do not forget writing, SEL, and morning meeting. Create a micro-schedule for the reading block aligned to reading programming and curriculum.

Add up all the minutes and compare to the length of the official school day.

## 4 Set specials offerings and rotation

Based on the school's allocation of teacher time for specials from the district, decide how frequently each special should be offered and for how long. Ensure the specials rotation maximizes student access to learning and also maximizes common planning time for teachers. A best practice is to have the same number of specials offered as sections in a grade. It can be simpler to offer different specials for the same amount of time and vary how frequently they are offered.

## 5 Align on schedules of shared staff

Sharing staff can be a powerful lever for providing students with more opportunities, however, schools that share staff must also build complementary schedules. Principals who are sharing staff should get together to help build school schedules by scheduling shared staff first.

## **6** Schedule other common blocks of time

Next, schedule other common school and grade-level blocks of time such as lunch, recess, morning meeting, and snack time.

## **7** Schedule math and reading blocks

Prioritizing core subjects requires also prioritizing scheduling reading and math blocks. It is important to stagger core blocks across grades to allow specialists to serve all grades through the day without pulling students out of core.

At this point in the process, it is possible that different blocks of time will need to be moved around.

## **8** Place intervention/enrichment blocks

First, determine who will provide intervention and what types of intervention and enrichment will be provided. Next, stagger intervention blocks by grade level to allow content-strong staff (e.g. interventionists and special education teachers) to see more students throughout the day.

## **9** Schedule all other classes and periods

With Steps 1-8 complete, begin scheduling other subjects such as social studies and science.

## **10** Review and refine the schedule with the scheduling team and staff

Review the schedule with the scheduling team to uncover potential challenges and generate new solutions.