

PWA working to create responsible, independent learners



Peace Wapiti Academy has been restructuring students' schedules to make them more independent learners and ultimately, to improve their grades. Students now have more flexibility in how they spend their class time as the school researches educational options for the 21st century.

PWA is one of 16 schools in Alberta testing the affect of alternative daily schedules, and whether students really need to spend 25-hours in a traditional classroom to earn a high school credit. "We entered into this because we were already doing a lot with technology and this seemed a good fit," said Josie Nagtegaal, a PWA teacher and the project's co-ordinator.

In September, the high school introduced a one-hour "iPlan" block midmorning in which students can work on whatever they need. It could be homework, catching up on class assignments, working on a group project, writing tests, taking an extra tutorial, or choosing a Career and Technology Studies (CTS) module that wouldn't normally fit into their timetables.

The hour was made up by shaving 19 minutes from each of four educational blocks, with traditional class time reduced from 83-minute blocks to 64-minute blocks. Students make up some of that time writing tests or completing assignments during the iPlan block. A student, for instance, might be assigned to write a test during a specific week; the student would write the test during his iPlan block, but he could choose the day. "This not only creates learning time in the classroom, but also fosters a growing sense of individual student responsibility toward the learning," says Nagtegaal.

Nagtegaal refers to the new approach as project-based learning. Rather than the teacher lecturing and the students taking notes and writing tests, students are expected to choose projects to demonstrate their knowledge. While they still have teacher support whenever they need, students are being taught to be more responsible for their own learning.

In addition to changing work patterns, the role of teachers at PWA has also changed. With the introduction this year of Academic and Individual Mentor (AIM), rather than simply directing students, teachers have become student advocates who monitor learning progress and guide the students as needed.

Although the results of the November surveys hadn't yet been analyzed, Nagtegaal says students "definitely have opinions" on the new schedule. "We have the extremely positive to the extremely negative," she says. However, teachers are reporting that a good percentage of students are completing homework and asking questions during the iPlan.

The changes are unique to PWA, and depending on results, may evolve again next year.