

KSBA PEAK Award Nomination Fall 2017

Submitted by: Henry County Public Schools

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Program Overview

Last year, the administration of Henry County Middle School (HCMS) chose to revamp what they offered as enrichment and elective courses to its students. Previously, students had no choice in the matter. Each student was required to take arts and humanities, physical education and health. Everyone received the same grade-appropriate curriculum over the course of their three-year tenure at the middle school. Student engagement was low in many instances, resulting in behavioral issues and in some cases, a poor learning and teaching environment.

“My thinking was that a lot of students were in a class they didn’t really care to be in, that they had no interest in,” said HCMS Principal Lucia Hughes. “It seemed like behaviors were arising from being in a class you’re not really interested in. I thought if students had more voice and choice in the enrichment classes that behaviors would improve, which would lead to improved quality of instruction and learning.”

Led by Hughes, the school decided to create a varied list of options for students to choose from to fulfill this course requirement. Students are still required to enroll in one arts, one PE and one health class each nine weeks, but in many cases, can choose from a list of options, even in their required classes. For example, a sixth grade student can rank their preferences for PE between indoor sports, outdoor sports or fitness/integrated health. In the area of arts, that same student can choose between 3D drawing, drawing I, painting I, sculpture and film making.

That same sixth-grader can then choose an elective in the area of the arts, physical education (options listed above) or enrichment, like computer literacy, Kentucky history, public speaking, mythbusters and more. Options vary for seventh and eighth grade students, but the structure of choices is the same – one required and one elective with several options to consider.

Courses were determined by polling teachers as to what they may be interested in presenting, then surveying students to determine their preferences as well. This process includes a visit to fifth-graders at each elementary school prior to their sixth grade year at the middle school to describe the courses offered to them.

Examples of current year course offerings for all students include: 3D drawing, drawing I and II, painting I and II, sculpture, film making, indoor and outdoor sports, fitness, book club, brain games, computer literacy, engineering (STEM), energy team, Kentucky history, life skills, media, mythbusters, public speaking, graphic design, animation, cardio, strength, basic web design, cinema studies, forensic science, Google It!, mythology, robotics (beginner and intermediate), science fair, service, video game design, photography, Broadway or Bust!, advanced sports strategy, weightlifting, Ready, Set, Go! (milder version of PE), culture and travel, construction, design and modeling, flight sim, Future City and Lego robotics. Courses last year included computer coding classes in 7th and 8th grade, a creative writing class, a journalism class, meteorology, current events, environmental science, theater appreciation and yoga.

The new system of course offerings also allows additional opportunities for those students enrolled in band or chorus, who previously did not have the chance to enroll in an enrichment course.

Objectives of the Program

The primary objective of offering expanded electives at HCMS was to give voice and choice to students, which would result in improved student engagement, quality of instruction, decreased behavior issues in elective classes and overall satisfaction of both students and staff with the courses in which they were enrolled and teaching.

As the humanities teacher and scheduler of enrichment classes puts it, “we had to meet the needs of the kids.”

“Kids want to do stuff that’s engaging, meaningful and interesting to them, and this gives them an opportunity to do that as opposed to being told what they are going to do,” Andy Buchholz said. “This truly gives them choice, and inherently respect, trust and accountability for those choices.”

Learning that incorporates student choice provides a pathway for students to fully and genuinely invest themselves in quality work that matters. Participating in learning design allows students to make meaning of content on their own terms. According to “Impact of Student Choice and Personalized Learning,” produced by Hanover Research in 2014, “...empowering students to exercise a degree of autonomous decision-making with student choice makes students active participants in their educations, thereby increasing levels of engagement,” resulting in “greater personal well-being and satisfaction in educational environments, as well as in terms of academic performance.” The report also states that “studies have found that students given a degree of choice about their learning showed improvement on standardized tests.”

Delineating course materials into specific content areas like painting or weightlifting allows the teacher to delve more deeply into that one subject rather than just touching on it for a week or two in a more broad-based class format. The result is a curriculum with more focus and rigor, resulting in stronger learner outcomes.

Students are given more time to learn about a particular aspect of either art, health, PE or a more non-traditional enrichment topic like cinema studies, website design, architecture and more. Teachers are able to more fully develop a lesson plan that provides for more in-depth understanding.

“Typically there are some things that will engage most kids at some point, but they weren’t interested in what came before and what came after,” Buchholz said. “We’re just trying to meet all their needs in a nine-week period by working inside these huge curriculums. We’ve refined and enhanced what we were doing.”

Administrators also believe by offering multiple content choices at this level that students will be given additional opportunity to explore subjects and interests at an age at which self-discovery is paramount to development. Many courses also tie into college and career readiness as they lay the groundwork for students to explore aspects of college majors and career choices in the arts, or engineering, or coding, or construction, etc.

“I wanted to take this class because it involved engineering, which is the field I plan to go into,” said one eighth grade student of his choice to take Future City as his enrichment class. “I’m interested in building aircraft.”

Scope of the Program

The expanded electives are offered to every HCMS student – about 470 in total. Course offerings are provided at grade-appropriate levels with different options available to sixth, seventh and eighth grade students. Courses rotate each nine weeks and each class has a developed standards-based curriculum, which enrichment teachers are provided an extra planning period to develop.

Costs and Funding Sources

There were no additional costs associated with the expanded course offerings.

Degree of School Board Involvement

Although decisions regarding each school's schedule are made at the school level, board members place the utmost trust in and fully support decisions made by each school's administration and site-based decision making council.

School board members rely on the administrators of each school to make decisions that will provide the best instructional environment for their students. Those efforts display themselves in a number of qualitative measures from attendance to behavioral issues to test scores and class grade point averages, which are made available to district administration, which then reports to board members.

Board members often ask questions of principals to gain further insight and ensure that actions are focused on doing what's best for students throughout the district. Board members speak often to each other and inform one another of various topics. If at any time a member hears a negative testimony regarding one of the school's offerings, further investigation occurs to assess the benefits and pitfalls of the activity. To date, the expanded enrichment opportunities have received positive reviews.

Innovative Nature of the Program

High school and college students enjoy a wide variety of electives from which to choose to best suit their interests or to introduce them to a new endeavor, while most middle schools provide a limited number of electives to students.

"I'm not a sporty person. I like to stay inside and create things," said one sixth-grader of her chosen enrichment class, Painting I. "This class suits my interests better and I'm actually learning a lot."

By tapping into the varied interests of teachers who provide enrichment classes, HCMS has been able to offer a wider variety of options outside of standard elective classes. By integrating student choice in determining those options, students have stronger buy-in, are learning more about a particular topic, exhibit fewer behavioral issues and overall seemed more satisfied, fulfilled and interested in their elective classes.

Assessment of the progress of program in relation to goals

Student satisfaction and engagement is evident in that the school has experienced a 50% decrease in requested schedule changes compared to the previous years when students were presented with limited options for enrichment opportunities.

Teachers and students are more fulfilled in what they are teaching and learning now that they have a voice in determining course offerings. Teachers report that students are excited to get to enrichment classes and will spend more time sharing their class experiences with their peers.

"Student interest in middle school is very high on the list of things you need to be doing because students are trying to figure out who they are, socially and mentally and what they are going to become," said humanities teacher Andy Buchholz, who takes the lead position on polling teachers and students to create a list of course offerings, then executes scheduling. "Playing to their interests and engaging them in things they find unique, interesting and enjoyable is definitely a very important part of what we should be doing in middle school. We're giving them opportunities to figure that out and maybe find an interest they didn't know they had because they had an opportunity at school that they wouldn't have gotten otherwise."

September 20, 2017

To the *PEAK Award* Screening Committee,

I am submitting this letter on behalf of Henry County Middle School and the Henry County Board of Education in support of our application for the *PEAK Award*. I am the arts and humanities teacher at HCMS and have been the leader of the transition we have made in how we schedule our students during their enrichment periods here. My sincere hope in this correspondence is that I may provide you with a clearer understanding of the decisions we have made, why we made them, and the positive consequences our decisions have made on our students and their learning and development here at Henry County Middle School.

Any successful discussion of where we are now, must begin with where we began. In the first three years of my tenure at HCMS, students at each grade were scheduled into their two “rotation” periods based on the following criteria:

- All students were to have the following nine-week classes: physical education, health, and arts and humanities. During the fourth term, students were given the choice to select to take P.E or arts and humanities a second time. They quite literally rotated from one class to the next—like cogs in a clock, their destiny predetermined.
- Students in band and choir used their second “rotation” period for these classes all year. They were not able to take any “enrichment” classes as a result, regardless of interest.
- Students that were not in band or choir were randomly placed into “enrichment” classes with their grade-level teachers during the other period. Teachers planned for these classes based on what they felt comfortable doing, not necessarily what their students were interested in.
- Students needing RTI were pulled from their “rotation/enrichment” classes depending on need.

This protocol is pretty standard in middle schools across the state and other areas. It’s efficient, if it’s anything.

Near the of the 2015-2016 school year, Lucia Hughes, our principal approached me about giving students more voice and choice in the arts and humanities classes—e.g., allowing them to decide if they wanted to focus on music, art, dance, or drama—and scheduling them one term based on this need. Eventually, we settled on allowing students to have choice in nearly all aspects of their rotation and enrichment scheduling. Students now take a survey at the end of each school year for the next one and indicate their preferences from more than eight different arts topics, up to five different physical education classes, and up to 15 different enrichment choice. The schedule is then built in a manner that

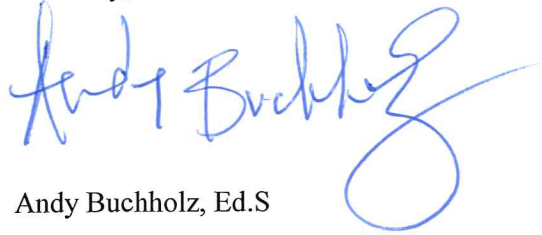
facilitates as many choices as possible for as many students as possible. These periods of the day now resemble electives more than a “rotation” class or an “enrichment.”

Our goals throughout this process were to empower student voice and choice in the classroom as well as improve the level of rigor and engagement in these classes as a result. Research and developmental psychology indicate that young adolescents need opportunities to explore who they are and what speaks to them as they work to define their identities. In our new elective system, students that are creative have the opportunity to explore many different arts courses over the course of even one year, sometimes two different classes in the same day. Similarly, students that seek to be active now have the opportunity to spend more time during the year in a physical education classes that include fitness options like weightlifting and cardio to provide increased rigor. Band and choir students now have the opportunity to explore the enrichment options in the schedule that they previously never could.

To date, this change has proved successful on different levels. From my perspective, at the epicenter of this program shift, the change has resulted in fewer negative behaviors in class and increased engagement. From an “arts and humanities” standpoint, the focus on specific disciplines within the arts has allowed for a deeper study of each, more hands-on opportunities to create, and opportunities to really focus on important pedagogical concepts such as practice, reflection and teaching readers through the lens of disciplinary literacy. In the past, my class necessitated a broad range of topics if I was to cater to student needs and interests. The scheduling shift has allowed me to group students efficiently and appropriately based on interest to ensure that all students are engaged thoroughly for the duration of each term while providing deeper learning opportunities for them.

I hope that this letter, albeit brief in scope compared to the magnitude of work done on our schedule, has helped to provide some more insight into the changes we have made to make our rotation periods more of an elective opportunity for students and the reasons why we made the decisions we have. I thank you for the time you have spent reviewing this letter and considering our application.

Sincerely,



Andy Buchholz, Ed.S

Arts and Humanities Teacher
Henry County Middle School

September 25, 2017

To the *PEAK Award* Screening Committee,

I am writing this letter as a student representative of Henry County Middle School. I am currently in eighth grade and I am writing this to share about our new elective program. I hope this letter provides an insight into our new system and gives you the information you need.

Having a variety of electives is very rewarding for students because we get to learn about what we want. Every spring we get to complete an interest form for the next year's electives by rating each elective by interest. We are required to take one physical education and one art class each year, and two health classes in three years. We usually end up getting nearly all of our top choices. This schedule implements order while allowing us some freedom.

When we get to choose our electives, we get to express ourselves with what we enjoy doing. As students we get to develop our own learning paths and it helps motivate us to learn the things that we choose to learn. It also makes our school day more exciting. We often look forward to our elective classes and are encouraged to learn at the best of our ability. We have a say in what we get to learn and we get to be involved in our education. When we choose our own electives we are more likely to make strong efforts to achieve our own learning.

Not only are our electives interesting, they are very academically enriching. Our electives teach us more than just things in the classroom, they give us skills we can take on into our lives outside of school. One of the interesting electives we offer is Public Speaking. In this class students learn to write speeches and practice speaking in front of a class. This class can help our kids overcome the fear of speaking in front of other people. This skill is very helpful for the students to take with them to their future lives. Speaking in front of others is a vital skill every person needs to know how to do.

Another of our unique qualities in our elective program is how we tailor our classes to our students' abilities. Our physical education classes have different intensities. First, we have Ready, Set, Go! This is an elective for beginner athletes and it teaches the students involved how to be active. This develops a habit for these children to lead healthy lifestyles when they

grow older. We also have a cardiovascular fitness class and a class more dedicated to sports. Cardio keeps students very active at an intense level while other classes are more dedicated to games and sports, such as soccer, basketball, and kickball. These physical education classes are not as intense as some like Cardio or Weightlifting, but they still keep the kids appropriately active and reinforce team principles and sportsmanship.

We also have a wide variety of arts classes to suit most everyone's needs. From Sculpting to Painting to Drawing to Filmmaking, anyone can find something they enjoy! If you have taken a class previously, then you have the option to do a more in-depth class the next year. For example, I have Painting II this year since last year I had Painting I. This second class allows me to apply my prior knowledge and techniques to my own self-designed unit of study. I will also take two more drawing classes this year, while still having the opportunity to take classes such as Robotics, Fight Simulation, Public Speaking, and Future City.

Thank you for taking the time to read my letter and including a student in this process. I have enjoyed sharing my point of view and await your announcement of the winners. I hope that you found the information helpful in your evaluation of our application for the *PEAK Award*.

Sincerely,



Kayla Harger

8th grade student
Henry County Middle School