



Innovative scheduling

A new teaching model paves the way to excellence

When it comes to innovative solutions to narrow the elementary school achievement gap, Roswell's Hillside Elementary School is emerging as a leader among Fulton County schools. This 2014-2015 school year, Hillside is implementing an entirely new scheduling and instructional model based on teacher subject specialization to provide deeper, richer academic experiences for students.

"We were faced with a question: How do we improve the achievement and satisfaction of both students and teachers while also meeting the high standards of content excellence set by Common Core?" said Principal Dr. Maisha Otway.

Otway and her administrative team posed the question to the teaching staff. Over several months, staff worked on proposals for new teaching and scheduling models based on strategies supported by contemporary educational research. The teaching staff and administrative team overwhelmingly approved a model called "**Innovative Scheduling.**"

Why Subject Specialization?

At the heart of the **Innovative Scheduling** model is **teacher subject specialization**. Previously, Hillside teachers taught all the **core content subjects**--math, science, social studies, and English and language arts (ELA)--to one class all year long. Now, teachers will focus their efforts on individual areas of content expertise (as identified by advanced specialized degrees or professional development, proven pedagogical strength, etc.) and will teach that subject to many classes.

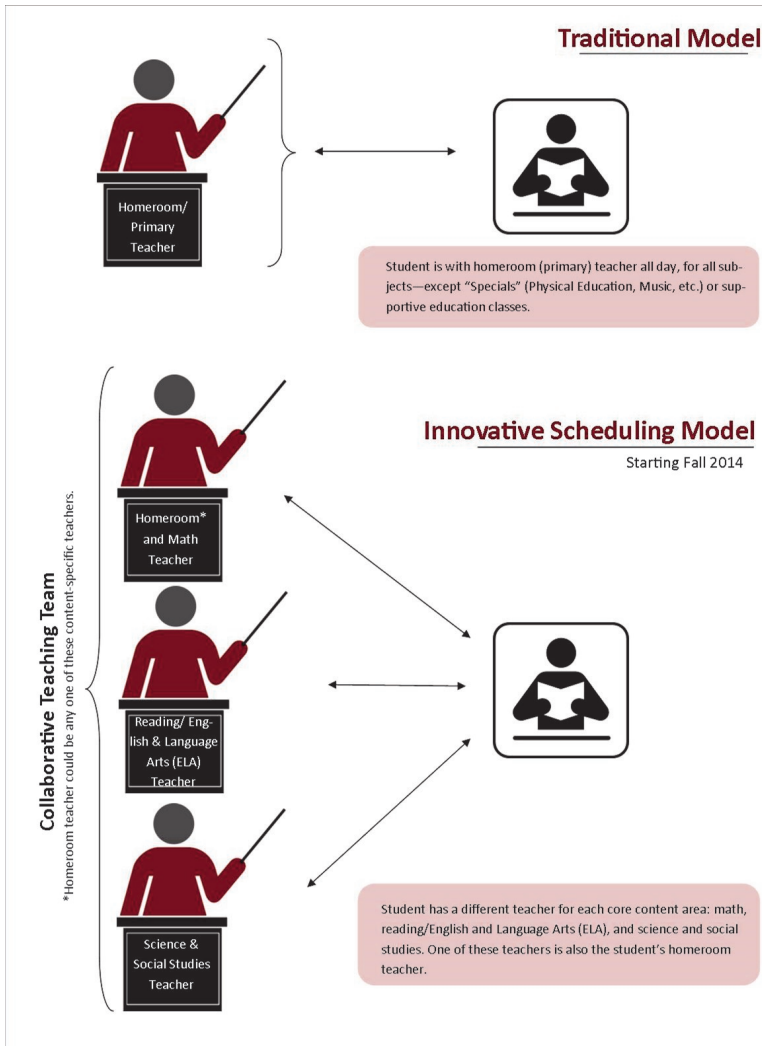
Each teacher has been assigned a homeroom, but she has also been identified as —a reading and English/language arts (ELA) teacher, —a math teacher, or —a science/social studies teacher.

"As a teacher, it's exciting to be focusing on a subject about which I feel passionate," said Jen Sweigart, an ELA teacher for grades 3-5 and Fulton County School's Teacher of the Year. "Certainly, all our teachers did their best to deliver excellent content to our students previous to this, but we all have our strengths—and this means we can delve deeper into our content areas to enrich student understanding and experience in a way that we could not before."

All teachers' content specialization falls within one of two grade-level bands: Kindergarten–2nd Grade (K-2) or 3rd–5th Grade (3-5). For instance, a K-2 math teacher delivers three classes of math each day: one to Kindergarten, one to 1st grade; and one to 2nd grade.

A student is placed with a particular teacher according to his or her grade level and his or her **Continuous Achievement Level**, which is a Fulton County Board of Education framework for advancement that allows each child to progress at their optimum pace and depth, expanding and compacting the curriculum as appropriate.

Because a Hillside teacher has expertise in her core content area and has access to the entire continuum of her grade-level band curriculum, she is in a unique position to identify when a student may be ready to advance or, conversely, may need to revisit earlier class material.



How it Affects the School Day

The most obvious change for students and their families will be how their day is structured. In the traditional model, the majority of the school's students remained with the same teacher each day, all day with the exception of small groups of students transitioning to different teachers for service such as 5th grade math, ESOL and Special Education services. Now, All Hillside students will move among three core classes (with the exception of scenarios such as supportive services).

A significant amount of planning has gone into logistics--especially how students will flow with teacher support from one content class to the next and to lunch/recess and "specials" classes. During the first weeks of school, students and teachers practiced these transitions together to become more familiar with each day's progression.

Hillside even reorganized the layout of classroom groupings to accommodate this K-2 and 3-5 grade level band model. The hallway on the east side of the school houses all K-2 classes, and the hallway on the west side houses all 3-5 classes. This means that a student's homeroom and core content classes are in one hallway. Not only does this help facilitate the smooth movement of children from one core content class to another across the hall, but it keeps students of a certain age/grade near each other and collaborative teaching teams near to each other, too.

Still Part of a "Class"

"Feeling as if they belong to a class and that they are part of a larger team is very important for students," said Otway. "We wanted to preserve this very fundamental experience for them."

So, in addition to sharing homeroom, a student will also spend lunch and recess with his or her "home" class and will attend all his/her "specials" classes (art, music, physical education) with this same group. A strong team dynamic also will be forged with group activities such as the "Husky Huddle" every morning.

"Students may find themselves in content classes with many of the same peers, but we wanted to make sure the 'same class' bond was established in other ways, too," said Dr. Otway.

Building Supportive Relationships

Every student at Hillside now has the best available teachers in core subjects and an opportunity to be challenged by different teachers and different classroom environments—while still benefitting from the security and connection with their "home" class. Students also have access to multiple adults with whom they can bond and form mentoring relationships.

Teachers will collaborate to maximize quality instruction and school experiences. They will attend weekly content area meetings, as well as grade level-specific meetings to ensure consistency and reduce overlap. Most importantly, if concerns arise, one teacher can confer with other teachers who know the child and collaborate to find innovative ways to help the student. They all work as a team to develop the whole child.

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—Jen Sweigart,
Reading and English/Language Arts
(ELA) Teacher for grades 3-5 and
Fulton County School District's
"Teacher of the Year"

Sharing Updates and Measuring Outcomes

"As exciting as this new model is, we understand that parents especially are eager to be kept apprised of how things are going and how the new model is affecting student outcomes," said Otway.

Frequent updates will be shared with parents/guardians throughout the school year, as well as measurable results, which will become available through state and national standardized testing.

"We are confident that Hillside's Innovative Scheduling model is going to make a significance difference for our students," said Otway. "We appreciate the support of our school community as we work together to achieve great things."



Parents/guardians with questions about the new model are encouraged to begin with their child's homeroom teacher. Questions can also be directed to Dr. Maisha Otway or Kelly Moynihan at (770) 552-6362.