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COMBAT COMMON CORE TIME CRUNCHES

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Lack of time is the most common objection I hear to Common Core implementation. Time crunches include:

- Finding the time in elementary school to restore writing to its proper place in the curriculum;
- Fitting science, history, and geography into an already-crowded school day;
- Balancing fiction and nonfiction in reading instruction;
- Making time for staff development, especially with the deeper understanding of mathematics required by Common Core;
- Helping teachers become experts in teaching science, history, geography, mathematics, and fiction and nonfiction reading and writing; and
- Accomplishing all of this in 180 days.

Here are some solutions to each of these time crunches.

Solution #1: Schedule to maximize reading and writing.

There is often no solid block of time for elementary teachers to teach reading and writing without interruption. The best solution I've witnessed for this time crunch is a staggered schedule for staff. Classroom teachers have the same assigned teaching time as now, but specialists in music, art, physical education, technology, library/media, and all special education resource teachers start their teaching day two hours later and teach two hours after the regular school day is over. Classroom teachers have two hours of uninterrupted time, and the specialists can offer an amazing array of afterschool experiences for children. In IEP meetings, it is determined whether special education pullout services are provided during the school day starting at 10 a.m. or after the regular school day is over. I suggest that classroom teachers use their two hours of uninterrupted time mostly for fiction reading and writing.

Solution #2: Marry reading and writing with science and history.

How do we insert science in the primary grades? Quite simply, science has to be a part of the classroom environment. In order for science to fit into the day, time must be subtracted from reading and replaced by writing time where students will write about the science around them. For instance, students can write stories about animals, classroom experiments, or patterns in nature. Further, the writing about science can be read by classmates, and reading is strengthened through the writing process.

What about history? Mix it with reading. For example, primary teachers can read one 32-page children's history book each week to their classes. Then, students can write about and draw a picture reflecting on the book read that week. Or, create student-authored ABC books. One recommendation under the Common Core is to provide multiple short research opportunities for students. Consider, after a unit on, say Lewis and Clark, having students compile an "ABC Book of Lewis and Clark." Each student writes one page for a letter, and all the pages are compiled into one booklet that is stored in the classroom. Find a planning guide for teachers on ABC books and other language arts activities [here](#).

Solution #3: Create department teams.

How do intermediate teachers ever find the time to develop the needed expertise in all subjects? One solution is to create a departmentalized intermediate grade structure for grades 3-5 (or 4-6 in a K-6 school). The problem with traditional departmentalization in the intermediate grades is that relationships can suffer with too many teachers for young children. The plan below departmentalizes and at the same time strengthens relationships between teachers and students.

Create three-person teams composed of one person from grade 3, one from grade 4, and one from grade 5. Each of the three teachers teaches language arts, with a focus on fiction reading and writing for their homeroom. In addition, each teacher teaches math, science, or social studies to grades 3, 4, and 5. Students assigned to a team of three teachers remain with that team for three years, thus strengthening student/teacher relationships.

A sample schedule for a grade 3, 4, 5 team could be:

	Grade 3 teacher who is also science specialist	Grade 4 teacher who is also math specialist	Grade 5 teacher who is also social studies specialist
8:00 to 10:00	Uninterrupted reading/writing for grade 3	Uninterrupted reading/writing for grade 4	Uninterrupted reading/writing for grade 5
10:15 to 11:15	Science for grade 3	Math for grade 4	Social studies for grade 5
12:00 to 1:00	Science for grade 4	Math for grade 5	Social studies for grade 3
1:15 to 2:15	Science for grade 5	Math for grade 3	Social studies for grade 4

Such an arrangement gives teachers time to develop the expertise demanded by Common Core. During the social studies and science time, teachers are responsible for using nonfiction books to assist with content learning, thereby meeting the requirement of more nonfiction reading.

This schedule does not include a planning period during the day. Ideally, somewhere during the day, the students are assigned to an art, music, or physical education teacher, and the team of three teachers can work/plan together.

Solution #5: Create time by reorganizing content reviews.

Many educators worry about squeezing learning for all the standards into a finite school year. One action teachers can take is to stop reviewing the prior year's content in the fall of the new year. If we ever expect to meet the standards of Common Core, the time spent in review (estimated at 30 percent of the year in a survey of 3,000 teachers) must be captured for new content.

First, establish a review formula for your school. I recommend that 25-33 percent of every graded and non-graded assessment have questions from at least two prior grade levels. At Centura School District in Nebraska, for instance, all weekly math quizzes have seven grade-level questions, two questions from one prior grade level, and one question from two prior grade levels.

Second, encourage teachers to structure assessments to combat the "cram/never learn/brain dump" cycle. For instance, teachers at Egyptian Elementary School in southern Illinois draw spelling words at random from three different grade-level canisters. The first quarter, students are expected to know 25 percent of the words on their spelling tests; by second quarter, 50 percent; at third quarter, 75 percent; and by the end of the year, all of the words. At year's end, students should have 100 percent of the words in their long-term memory.

As I observe schools across the United States, most are "solving" the time problems by robbery; time is subtracted from science, history, geography, art, music, writing, and physical education and given to reading. But, the Common Core is asking us to do better, and we can, if we use smart time strategies.

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