

Planning the Weekly Schedule in the Elementary Grades

This document is intended to assist teachers and administrators as they plan and organize appropriate learning activities for children in the elementary grades. Kindergarten experiences and schedules are discussed in a separate brochure, *“Planning the Use of Time in the Kindergarten.”*

School Purposes and Goals

Each elementary school should be guided by a statement of philosophy or mission which is reflective of the school community and which directs the purposes and goals of the school. The instructional program should support children in achieving high standards of learning. Therefore, teachers and administrators should take great care in planning weekly schedules to assure that instructional strategies, activities, and procedures enable all students to successfully achieve local and/or state standards and goals.



Instructional Hours

The minimum number of hours that schools must be in session each school year is established by Nebraska state law. Elementary schools are required to provide at least 1,032 hours of instruction per year, and local school boards are required through Rule 10 (accreditation) and nonpublic schools through Rule 14 (approval) to develop a policy which defines instructional hours. The local policy should establish clear direction for teachers and administrators regarding the instructional activities which may be counted as part of the 1,032 hours, and specifically those which are excluded. For example, Rule 10 and Rule 14 direct that lunch time may not be counted in meeting the minimum instructional hours.

The Weekly Schedule

Rule 10 and Rule 14 require that each elementary school have on file a representative weekly schedule for each classroom teacher encompassing experiences in reading and language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, health, physical education, art, and music. Writing experiences, educational/computer technology, and, in public schools, multicultural education, are also to be incorporated in the instructional program. These requirements are intended to assure that all children experience a well-rounded curriculum on a weekly basis, while giving the school flexibility in organizing the elementary program.

The daily and weekly instructional schedules should provide guidance to the teacher and stability in the life of the child; however, the schedule should also remain flexible. Learning is an integrated process and the time spent on any area of the curriculum may vary from day to day or from week to week. For example, a large block of time scheduled to engage children in a science investigation which also incorporates related language arts activities may alter the schedule for that particular day. During another day, a larger portion of time may be directed to math and problem-solving activities. The instruction planned from day to day should balance vigorous and quiet activities. The children should have many opportunities to participate in “hands-on” activities, in large and small group discussions, and in independent and quiet seatwork. Assessment practices should also encourage integration of subjects in the learning experiences and should be incorporated into regular instruction to guide students and teachers in assessing progress.

Use of the Time Chart

The chart on page 3 is intended to provide guidance in developing a balanced schedule for the elementary school day and week. Since Nebraska state law establishes only a minimum length for the entire school year (1,032 hours), the length of the school day varies somewhat from school to school. To accommodate these differences, the accompanying chart uses percentages of time as well as numbers of minutes to provide suggested weekly time allotments for each subject area.

The Elementary Subject Areas



Description and Recommendations

The elementary instructional program should help all children acquire basic skills, knowledge, and understanding in each curricular area. As indicated in the quality indicators for Elementary Curriculum in Rule 10: “The elementary instructional program is based on state or locally approved standards for student learning and helps each student acquire knowledge, skills, and understanding in all subject areas. The instruction is appropriate for the grade level of the students. Teaching and learning activities and the general environment stimulate, nurture, and encourage involvement in a wide range of learning experiences. The program helps students apply and extend basic skills by integrating topics throughout the curriculum. The schedule is sufficiently flexible to encourage teachers and students to address emergent needs and topics.” The elementary curriculum includes the components described below:

Reading and Language Arts

The curriculum includes development and practice of skills and understanding in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. It helps children develop appreciation of literature, creativity, and expression.

Mathematics

The curriculum includes development, practice, and application of numeration, computation, estimation, problem solving, geometry/spatial concepts, measurement and related topics.

Social Studies

The curriculum helps children develop an understanding of the world and its people. It includes experiences drawn from geography, history, economics, government, citizenship, career awareness, human relations, current affairs, and cultural studies. This includes instruction in American history and stories about the exploits and deeds of American heroes, singing patriotic songs, memorizing the “Star Spangled Banner” and “America” and reverence for the flag and proper conduct for its presentation as provided in 79-724 R.R.S.

Science

The curriculum helps children develop an understanding of science concepts and processes, and includes science as inquiry. It includes experiences drawn from physical science, life science, earth and space science, science and technology, and the history and nature of science.

Health

The curriculum helps children develop an understanding of the body systems, nutrition, wellness (including physical activity), and healthy living habits.

Physical Education

The curriculum helps children develop and maintain physical coordination, large and small muscle control, physical fitness, leisure activities, and healthy behaviors.

Visual Arts

The curriculum helps children understand and apply a variety of media techniques, and processes within a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas. The curriculum includes reflection upon and assessment of art and the study of art in relation to history, culture, and other curricular areas.

Music

The curriculum helps children sing and play a variety of music, read and notate music, listen to and describe music, and evaluate music. The curriculum includes music in relation to history culture, and other curricular areas.



The Importance of Integrated Learning Opportunities



In a chart such as the one below, time allotments are shown for individual subjects. However, a visual representation of the weekly schedule cannot portray the dynamic relationships that should exist among the curricular areas in the elementary school. Throughout the week, topics of study (such as weather, or animals, or early explorers) should be used to integrate various subjects. On this chart, the language arts time is intended to cover that time devoted to specific instruction in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Use and practice of language arts skills should be included in many ways in all other curricular areas, but especially in social studies, science, and health.

Also, as much as possible, teachers should correlate art, music, health, and physical education with the other curricular areas. Children learn many of the “basic academic skills” through experiences in the arts. Language development and awareness of special relationships basic to reading, writing, and math are enhanced remarkably through dramatization, creative movement, and work in the visual arts. Such opportunities should be provided often for all children to strengthen their disposition to be readers and writers.

Incorporating large blocks of time in the schedule will accommodate inclusion of language arts throughout the curriculum. However, too much time spent studying reading and writing skills with too little opportunity to actually read and write may discourage rather than contribute to progress in the language arts. Therefore, children should be provided ample time to read a variety of library materials as well as regular textbooks. Writing opportunities should be provided daily through experiences such as writing journals, stories, paragraphs, captions, letters, charts, and plays. Social studies, science, and health activities will frequently have writing and reading associated with them. Examples include describing science experiments or preparing social studies charts, dramatizations, posters, and booklets. These kinds of purposeful and authentic learning experiences should replace “fill-in-the-blank” worksheets or workbooks in the instructional program.

Suggested Weekly Time Allotments for the Subject Areas in the Elementary School

Minutes Per Week	Percent of Time	PRIMARY Gr 1-2	Intermediate Gr 3-4	UPPER GR 5-6 or 5-8	Percent of Time	Minutes Per Week
126	7%		MUSIC		7%	126
126	7%		ART		7%	126
225	12.5%		SOCIAL STUDIES		17.5%	315
630	35%		LANGUAGE ARTS AND READING		25%	450
225	12.5%		SCIENCE AND HEALTH		17.5%	315
270	15%		MATH		15%	270
108	6%		PHYSICAL EDUCATION		6%	108
90	5%		OTHER		5%	90
1800						1800

Other Instructional Time

In addition to listing the curricular areas, the chart includes a small percentage of time designated as “other.” This time is intended for activities that support the elementary curriculum and instructional programs. This may include, for example, instruction in computer skills and technology, library-media time, or world language experiences. Students and teachers may utilize this time to discuss, organize, or summarize daily experiences, or engage in other supportive learning activities.

The daily schedule should also include time for recess, especially in the lower and intermediate grades. Recess supports a child’s need for less structured time and should be a time for children to relax without the need to be attentive to an instructional activity. Physical education class is usually not an appropriate substitute for a recess break.

Length of the School Day

Although Nebraska laws and regulations give local school systems total responsibility for establishing the length of the school day, it is recommended that the day for the elementary age student be a minimum of five and one-half and a maximum of seven hours in length. In circumstances where the elementary school must schedule long days to accommodate district busing schedules, teachers and administrators should provide a schedule that assures children ample time for recess and various other activities of a less structured nature.

Teacher Assignment

The elementary endorsement on the teaching certificate indicates that the teacher is prepared to teach all subjects in the elementary grades. A teacher who spends most of the day with one group of children in a self-contained classroom setting has the best opportunity to integrate the content of the instructional program. Also, this setting provides the teacher with ample flexibility in adjusting the daily activity schedule to meet the changing needs of the children.

Widespread use of departmentalization within the elementary school is generally not recommended. Departmentalization tends to place the focus of instruction on isolated subject matter rather than on the dynamic integration of curricular content, ideas, and concepts which make learning meaningful for children. In addition, frequent movement of children from class to class interrupts quality learning time and may contribute to inappropriate student behavior.

In some elementary schools, art, music, physical education, and technology skills are taught by teachers assigned specifically to those curricular areas. In those instances, teachers and school administrators are strongly encouraged to assure that all teachers involved in the instructional program coordinate goals, objectives, and activities. The responsibility lies with the staff to share plans and ideas and to integrate instruction with the clear intent of making learning meaningful, real, and appropriate for each child.

Conclusion

A visit to a typical elementary classroom should reveal teachers providing instruction in meaningful ways and children genuinely engaged in active and instructive learning experiences. The daily and weekly schedule should be supportive of an educationally sound learning environment and should reflect a well-rounded instructional program provided for all elementary children. A good schedule, functioning as a helpful guide for teachers, provides stability in the student day, yet assures flexibility in meeting the changing needs of students. The following items are intended to serve as a guide when planning the daily and weekly elementary classroom schedule:

- ◆ Include all curricular areas, at least weekly
- ◆ Base the schedule on a six-hour school day, not counting lunch time.
- ◆ Provide large blocks of time supportive of the integration of curricular areas.
- ◆ Provide flexibility to encourage a variety of instructional activities (projects, plays, investigations, movement activities, quiet time, expressive writing, reading of literature, etc.)



References

The Nebraska Department of Education publishes a number of resources to assist teachers in planning and carrying out programs which are both developmentally appropriate and intellectually rigorous:

Rule 10 (*Regulations and Procedures for the Accreditation of Schools*) August 1, 2015.

Rule 14 (*Regulations and Procedures for the Legal Operation of Approved Nonpublic Schools*) July 28, 2012.

Nebraska and Iowa Departments of Education. (2001). *The Primary Program: Growing and Learning in the Heartland*. Lincoln, NE: Nebraska Department of Education. Is available for download in PDF format from: <http://www.education.ne.gov/OEC/publications.html>.

Nebraska Standards, Frameworks for various subjects are available on the Nebraska Department of Education web site www.education.ne.gov/AcademicStandards/index.html or by calling (402) 471-6692.