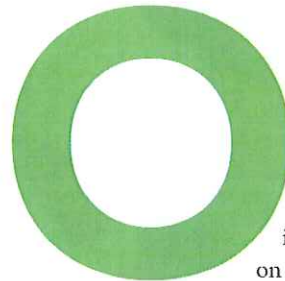


# POWER Hour!

Jayne Ellspermann

Letting 2,000 students share one hour-long lunch seemed crazy at first, but the positive results in academic achievement, student engagement, and school culture prove that it was a smart move.



One hour can change the culture of an entire school. Three years ago, West Port High School in Ocala, FL, embarked on a potentially risky experiment to change the culture of its growing school. The result was a change that had a positive impact beyond its original concept. Course failure rates plummeted, participation in cocurricular activities skyrocketed, discipline referrals declined dramatically, school pride blossomed, and the school earned a state grade of A.

This change in our culture did not occur overnight. When I originally began discussing using an expanded lunch period to increase student opportunities for academic success, I was met with doubt and outright fear. Our student population approached 2,000—and because of open enrollment, it was growing—and the cafeteria was built to hold approximately 500 students. We were having difficulty managing the three scheduled lunch periods each day. My proposal prompted the teachers to ask how we could give students that much freedom, who would supervise the students, and what the teachers would have to give up to implement this questionable idea.

Over the course of a year, I continued the conversation and developed a group of pioneers who were willing to explore how this concept would work. The group came up with many poten-

tial goals that focused on creating a positive academic culture and school climate. For example, nearly all of our students were eligible for busing and didn't have opportunities to receive academic assistance beyond the school day. That lack of opportunity to receive extra tutoring and to make up assignments and tests contributed to poor grades and a 37% course failure rate.

Another issue that our school faced was very low participation in cocurricular activities. It is very hard to develop a positive school culture when students cannot join clubs or become involved in school activities outside their classes. Because the school day began when the buses arrived, students had 5 minutes between classes, a 30-minute lunch period, and 7 minutes after the dismissal bell before buses left to interact with other students or their teachers other than in class.

The proposed concept was simple: students and teachers would have one hour in the middle of the school day to eat lunch and participate in different activities. The teachers would have their union-contracted duty-free lunch during half of that hour, and they would hold office hours during the other half hour when they could offer tutoring, sponsor clubs, create learning opportunities, provide make up sessions, or anything else that would enhance a positive school culture for our school. Students could eat at any

**Discussion guide included.**



time during the hour anywhere on campus. They could also use the hour to get help from a teacher, join a club or other school activity, or develop an activity with other students.

### Putting the Plan in Place

Throughout the school year, I kept up my conversations regarding the possibilities and the extra time it would create for both students and teachers. I also had to ensure that we had a full hour to devote to lunch. We already had 5 minutes at the beginning and end of the three 30-minute lunch periods (a total of 20 minutes of transition time). I was able to convince the district to give us 5 minutes at the beginning of the school day and 5 minutes at the end of the school day. With the additional 10 minutes, we had our hour.

During teacher preplanning before

the 2011–12 school year, the group of teachers joined me in explaining to the entire faculty this wonderful “game changing” opportunity that we were going to roll out to students on the first day. Teachers were given an opportunity to sponsor clubs and create academic time for students. The teachers selected either A lunch or B lunch and then planned their activities around a schoolwide calendar. Within hours, they created a calendar of their office hours, clubs, activities, and a variety of opportunities for their students. With the new plan in place, they were genuinely excited about embarking on this new concept for lunch.

The first week of the 2011–12 school year, we introduced students to the concept of lunch with extended opportunities. We planned an athletic and activities fair in the gym so that

students could learn about different athletic opportunities for the sports program as well as all the great clubs and activities that the teachers were sponsoring. Students were able to see what activities West Port had to offer as well as have lunch with their friends. We encouraged our juniors and seniors to eat lunch during the second half of the hour to reduce the lunch line at the beginning of the hour.

The students were challenged to show us with their behavior and the care of the campus that they were mature enough for this huge shift in our school culture. The entire campus was opened for lunch. Students could eat in the cafeteria, in the hallways, in the courtyard, in classrooms, in stairwells—basically everywhere except the media center and the computer labs. The students went beyond our

## West Port High School

OCALA, FL

**GRADES:**

9–12

**ENROLLMENT:**

2,557 students

**COMMUNITY:**

Rural

**DEMOGRAPHICS:**

44.4% White, 24% Hispanic, 21.1% Black, 3.2% Asian, 1.2% American Indian, 6.1% Multiracial; 65% free and reduced-price lunch

**ADMINISTRATIVE TEAM:**

1 principal, 3 assistant principals



expectations. The first week, the campus was cleaner after lunch than it had ever been with three lunch periods. Their enthusiasm to join clubs resulted in record enrollment in cocurricular activities. The students named this lunch period “Power Hour” because they thought that it gave them the power to use that time to improve.

### Transforming the School

The rest is history. Magical things began to happen. AP study sessions were formed and students crammed into classrooms to work on assignments outside of their regular classwork. Student rock bands scheduled time in our courtyard to play during Power Hour. Flash mobs of student dancers or singers performed to the delight of the students and teachers in our courtyard. Students began making up work at unimagined levels. Parent-student-teacher conferences focused on how students could best use Power Hour to ensure that they were on target in their classes.

Students worked in open computer labs on class assignments or took extra online courses. Throughout campus, groups of students gathered to collaborate on projects. Classrooms

filled with students who ate lunch while getting help or just visiting with teachers. Teachers soon found that 30 minutes was not enough time to meet with students and began holding bag lunch opportunities so that students could join them.

At the end of the first year, student course failure had dropped to 3.8% from 37%. Student participation in cocurricular activities went from approximately 10% to more than 60%. Student disciplinary referrals were cut in half. West Port earned a school grade of A from the state. The positive school climate resulted in our student enrollment climbing to more than 2,200 students the following school year.

### Conclusion

We are now starting our third year of Power Hour. Student enrollment at West Port is now more than 2,500 students, the campus is immaculate, students are positively engaged in school activities, last year’s course failure was less than 3%, and overall school attendance is up as well as attendance at our athletic events. Discipline referrals are so low that teachers new to our school ask whether the students are really that good and other schools in

our area are incorporating Power Hour into their schedules.

The imagined risks never materialized. Trusting the students to use their time wisely empowered them to be successful. They are proud that they are trusted to use this time to be with their friends and to help themselves academically. High-achieving AP and dual enrollment students as well as academically struggling students find the relationships they have developed with their teachers and other students during Power Hour extend to the classroom. Power Hour is win-win for our students and teachers.

Skeptics in the community have come to visit during Power Hour and come away with a renewed optimism about the future because they see the students handling responsibility with tremendous success. Power Hour has resulted in our school continuing to earn a grade of A from the FL Department of Education, but more important is the positive culture that has led to a dynamic shift in all aspects of West Port. **PL**

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