

Evaluation of Departmentalized Instruction in Elementary Schools: Exploring Implementation Experiences

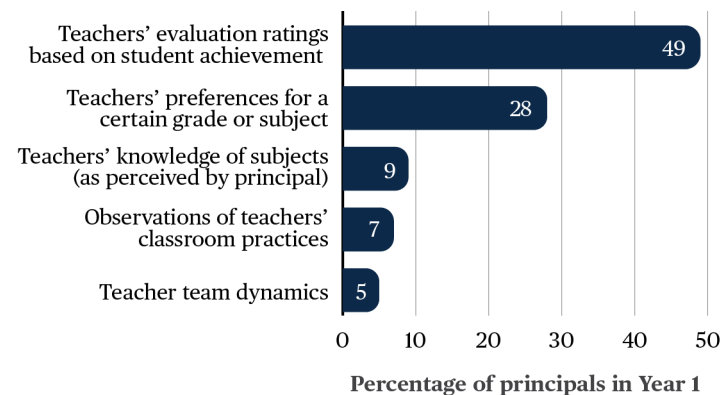
A Publication of the National Center for Education Evaluation at IES

Helping schools more efficiently use their resources to improve student achievement and teacher retention is a longstanding and important priority for education policymakers. This study examined one potential strategy for achieving these goals in elementary schools. In departmentalized instruction, teachers teach only their strongest subjects to multiple classes rather than teaching all subjects to a single class (self-contained instruction). Departmentalizing may improve instruction by providing more time for planning and professional development in teachers’ assigned subjects. It may also increase teachers’ satisfaction if teachers are assigned to the subjects they prefer. However, by increasing the number of students teachers must get to know, it could interfere with relationship-building and decrease teachers’ engagement with students and parents. This study looked at the experiences of 90 schools that either voluntarily switched to departmentalized instruction or continued having their teachers teach all subjects to a single 4th- or 5th-grade class for two years beginning in fall 2019.

Key Findings

- Schools implemented the three key steps needed to departmentalize instruction, but some faced scheduling challenges.** After selecting a staffing model (step 1), schools that departmentalized mostly assigned teachers to subjects in ways aligned with the teacher’s relative strengths (step 2), as shown in Exhibit 1. However, 42 percent of schools reported that departmentalized instruction made it challenging to develop a schoolwide schedule (step 3).
- Departmentalized teachers’ experiences were consistent with some, but not all, of the potential benefits and challenges of using departmentalized instruction.** For example, departmentalized teachers spent more hours per week than other teachers planning for each subject they taught, and they were more satisfied with what they taught. However, departmentalized teachers also reported spending less time meeting with students and their parents, which might make it harder for teachers to understand students’ needs and adapt their instruction to meet those needs.
- The effects of departmentalized instruction on student achievement and teacher retention remain unclear.** This study was unable to assess how departmentalized instruction affected student achievement and teacher retention in part because the COVID-19 pandemic limited some schools’ participation in the study. Other recent studies found that students taught by departmentalized teachers had lower achievement than those taught by self-contained teachers, but those studies had some shortcomings that limit confidence in their conclusions.

Exhibit 1. Factors Principals from Departmentalized Schools Reported Were Most Important When Assigning Teachers to Subjects



Source: Principal interviews conducted in fall 2019 and spring 2020, 43 principals of schools using departmentalized instruction.