For two hours during the regular school day, teachers and students at Foundations College Prep in Chicago’s Roseland neighborhood break into small groups for what they call “flex time.” Face-to-face with students, sometimes even one-on-one, teachers practice reading aloud, finding text evidence, writing sentences and solving math equations with their students, the majority of whom arrived at the school’s doorsteps in September years below grade level.

Foundations concentrates the small-group instruction in the core subjects of math and reading, hoping to make up for years of lost learning. During flex hour, students aren’t able to escape the lesson at hand. Wandering eyes are called back to the page by the teacher staring at them from across the table. Key misunderstandings are identified in the moment by the teacher monitoring students’ white boards and expressions. Teachers have spent countless hours getting to know the students in their groups, and can call on those relationships to know how to motivate a struggling student, or what obstacle prevents one from reading more fluently.

The small-group instruction that takes place during “flex time” is crucial to Foundation’s model, which reimagines the school day to make better use of time, technology and talent. Executive director Micki O’Neil arrived at this vision after working with organizations such as New Schools for Chicago and Teach for America. Even the best teachers she saw in action struggled to differentiate instruction for students, and it was clearly essential to helping students grow. As O’Neil worked to create this new charter school, she wondered: “How can we set up a school to better support small-group instruction and differentiation?” She wanted Foundations to be a place where the systems and structures of the school were set up to support teachers toward this goal. “Differentiation shouldn’t just be on teachers to figure out, because even the best teachers really struggle with it,” O’Neil says.

O’Neil’s vision for the school was shared by Sarah Hunko Baker, a Ryan Fellow principal who emerged as the leader for the school. When they opened Foundations in the fall of 2014, the two looked to set aside a part of the school day to enable that small-group instructional focus from the get-go. The need for such an approach became more apparent when the team took a look at student data at the beginning of the year. They saw students coming in three, and sometimes four, years below grade level. “We saw how urgent it was that kids really do need better instruction, more individualized instruction—stat and pronto,” Baker says. On average, students were in the 3rd and 10th percentile in math and reading on the NWEA MAP assessment, with lots of students presenting as non-readers or with low numeracy skills. “What do you do with a school where 75 percent of the kids need intervention? Let’s throw out the script and rewrite it so it meets their needs better,” she says.
The result: “Way more robust differentiation, and actually getting kids what is needed. We’re making sure there is a time when every student is paid attention to, which just wouldn’t happen with a class of 30 kids—even with really strong teachers,” O’Neil says. This model is “guaranteeing that it’s happening every day.”

Two goals: Culture and Small Groups

As a startup school, the leaders knew they wanted to narrow their focus to concentrate on doing just a couple things well. They set two priorities for the first year: Establishing a warm but strict school culture and driving game-changing student growth through high quality small-group instruction. To achieve these goals, Baker says it was important to hire flexible, entrepreneurial staff members who were bought into the idea of rethinking the school day in a dramatic way, as they needed people who were able to deal with some of the course corrections that occurred the first year. Baker regularly emphasizes the two priorities in weekly staff emails and other communications. “We’ve really not deviated much from priorities 1 and 2. There have been a few times where we’ve been tempted with ‘Should we work on student engagement?’ We’ve done some work there, but I’ve worked really hard to focus us on those priorities,” Baker says.

To prepare teachers for flex time, the whole staff completed a Fountas & Pinnell training over the summer, as well as sessions on the key components of what should be happening in small-group instruction. All of the professional development has been aligned to the school’s two priorities. Small-group teams meet together throughout the week. On Fridays, the whole team comes together for weekly professional development from 1:45 p.m. to 3:30 p.m. During that time, staff members usually talk about their small groups. They may be broken up by subject areas to discuss practices, such as guided reading, that are used during flex time. “Then there’s a lot of time where we’re talking about what we’re noticing in the data, what we’re seeing with kids, we’re sharing best practices,” Baker says.

Scheduling: Finding the Time

Foundations has an extended 8-hour day with class in session from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Thursday. Students have six or seven class periods per day, with every day’s schedule different as the staff fits the puzzle pieces together. On Fridays, students are dismissed early at 1:30 p.m. for teacher professional development and team meetings. To create time for the school’s 11 teachers to balance multiple small groups with whole class instruction, the leadership created larger classes of 30 to 40 students for reading and math. With the goal of maximizing student exposure to high quality teachers, the larger classes are led by expert-level teachers and assisted by a first-year resident teacher. The larger classes make it so Foundations can offer the small-groups without needing to significantly increase the staff size. “All the pieces fit together delicately to make sure we’re not overtaxing our teachers,” Baker says.

At 1 p.m. and 2 p.m., Monday through Thursday, students go to one of three different environments: flex time, gym or art. If they are in flex time for the first block, they will be in gym or art the next block. “That allows us to make sure those ratios are really small,” Baker says. Depending on a student’s needs, he or she could be in a group with a 2-to-1 student-teacher ratio. For students who are near, on or above grade level, the groups might grow to 5 students per teacher. Each flex room has 2 to 4 teachers.

During their flex hour, students work in their assigned group for 30 minutes and then switch to their second grouping. If they were in math, they move to reading, and vice versa, although a student could have a double block of one subject if necessary. Students also have individual learning lab time to work at their own pace on laptop computers stationed in the flex rooms.
The arrangement results in each student getting at least three small groups a week in math and reading. Students who are farthest behind may get four small groups, and some may have even more flex time. There are always a couple of teachers working in a lab environment with small groups throughout the day, Baker says.

Foundations doesn’t have many instructional aides. Paraprofessionals don’t teach during the small-group time, so the small groups are led by classroom teachers. The staff does take an all-hands-on-deck approach to flex time, as the principal, the dean and special education teachers all have small-group assignments. The way it works out, teachers lead flex groups from three to four times a week.

The school day is structured so students receive math and ELA daily, then science and social studies throughout the week. Baker says the school still stacks up well compared to other schools in terms of what they offer for specials. “We don’t take a lot of (time for the small groups) from ELA and math blocks. We are on par with what another extended day school would have for those subjects. Students have an enrichment period every day, plus kids get either gym or art every day—sometimes more than once. They might have gym in afternoon and art in the morning,” she explains.

Some days, students may have longer, larger classes with teachers doubled up, or shorter classes with just one teacher. Enrichment is at the end of the day from 3:15 p.m.-4 p.m., with the staff leading sessions in photography, martial arts, tech crew, drama and 3D printing.

**Grouping students**

Under Foundations’ first approach to grouping students, two teachers were assigned to a larger flex time class of 25 to 32 students. Students were grouped using NWEA data for reading and math. “It had to make sense with the kids in both groups. You had to be able to pull a math group and pull a
reading group from that group of students,” Baker says. But the structure resulted in one teacher handling a small group and the other teacher monitoring the remaining kids on computers, which did not yield as much small-group instruction as the team wanted. For example, Baker and another teacher were assigned a group of 30 kids. While she worked with a group of five boys teaching small-group reading, the other teacher supervised the remaining students on the laptops. “It was not the best use of teacher-student time,” she says. And so, they scrapped that plan and went back to the drawing board. They decided to split the students up differently each flex period, sending half to gym or art at that time to lower the number of students in each flex class. For the second hour, the gym or art group would switch to flex time and vice versa.

### Resident Teacher Sample Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:00-8:28 a.m.</td>
<td>Advisory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:30-9:48 a.m.</td>
<td>Assist expert teacher with 6th Grade ELA (with assistant teacher)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:50-11:08 a.m.</td>
<td>Planning period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:10-12:28 p.m.</td>
<td>Assist expert teacher with 7th Grade ELA, which is divided into 2 classrooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:30-1:03 p.m.</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:05-2:03 p.m.</td>
<td>Flex Time (1 of 4 teachers in flex classroom leading small groups in reading)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:05-3:03 p.m.</td>
<td>Flex Time (1 of 2 teachers in flex classroom leading small groups in reading)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:05-3:13 p.m.</td>
<td>Advisory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Flex rooms now have about 12 students, with some classes larger, some smaller. The idea was that “those 12 kids are going to be owned by those teachers who are their flex teachers,” Baker says. The team has noticed that the students tend to grow together, and can be shifted up together. “But sometimes when that isn’t the case, you might have one kid in a reading group you just move into your other reading group and you have to work with your math teacher to make sure that’s not at the same time,” Baker says.

Students are still assigned using NWEA data, with the goal being to create groupings that make sense for both reading and math. Ideally, the first half of the hour the students receive small-group instruction in reading, then can move as a group to math for the second half of their flex time. “That took a lot of work to make sure RIT bands sort of matched up for both,” Baker says. They also use Fountas & Pinnell reading levels to group students. “So a Q group had to make sense, plus a math RIT
band had to make sense in those same groups,” she says. “There are a few groups where you have to expand a couple letters. You might have a Q-R group going on, but that’s going to happen in any elementary school class where you’re differentiating,” Baker adds.

The system does allow for flexibility if a team needs to pull students in groups in slightly different ways. “It’s a lot of time on the front end for analysis and putting them into the initial flex groups and from there, distilling down to who will rotate to each teacher,” Baker says. The staff revisits the groups about quarterly, but are constantly making small changes to the flex groups based on what teachers observe day to day. Teachers work with their coaches to structure the objectives of each lesson and devise appropriate strategies.

Instead of the students switching teachers when they progress to a new level, they stick with the same teacher. Whereas the former way allows the teacher to become more specialized at teaching to one level, Foundations method is enabling for deeper relationships, staff members say. “The amount that you can get to know a kid when you’re in a group of three or four every single day is just incredible,” says Baker. The continuity and time enables teachers to learn specific causes of reading deficits for particular students within the small groups.

Students learn pretty quickly where to head for each flex-time grouping. Some of the classrooms have schedules hanging up in the room that spell out which students go with which teacher for the first 30-minute block, and then the second block. “They get used to, on Monday, I know I start with reading and then go to math. They get into a routine, then we don’t have to remind them,” teacher Calvin Allan says. Those students working on computers usually check in with their small-group instructor or adviser to talk about what they should work on—math or reading. They also discuss which skills to focus on, such as fractions, or if they need to practice reading aloud. “Kids are really articulate at this point. They know ‘I need to get on TenMarks.com because it’s more straightforward and I need to work on my fractions,’” says Allan.

Planning Flex-Time Lessons

Teachers plan for the small groups as they do for their whole class lessons. The Week at a Glance, or WAG, form they turn in each week spells out the plan for each flex group. It details the students who are in the group, the objective of the lesson, the teaching strategy that will be employed, and what questions will be asked to assess student mastery. Teachers may note when one student might be pulled aside from the group to work on a different task, if needed. Some teachers also include notes about students’ progress. ELA teachers can communicate with each other about particular students through a shared ELA Notes document, where they include observations about student fluency, misunderstandings or breakthroughs. Teachers say the WAG keeps the staff accountable to being properly prepared for flex time.

Teacher Calvin Allan leads four small groups during the week. The number of times he sees each student during the week varies according to their needs. One group he sees three days out of the week for 30-minute blocks; one he sees for a full hour on Thursdays.

As for group size, he appreciates groups with about five students. “It’s small enough that it’s intimate but large enough to have engagement. My group of three is kind of challenging because sometimes
they don’t want to participate, but now that we’ve gotten closer they engage more,” Allan says. “Five is perfect because I always have someone who wants to engage and push the group.”

Within each small group, teachers can further differentiate up or down, Allan says. He may push some scholars up, or if someone needs help, he can reinforce more basic skills. “It gives me some room. I have a group I’ve assessed, where a couple of students are above where the rest of the group is. I still teach them all, but I differentiate up,” he says.

Some students appreciate the one-on-one attention, Allan says, because they can ask questions and practice skills. With one particular student, “I notice he can read more fluently and it’s transferring over into the larger ELA classroom,” he says. “He’s getting more confident, and participating more.”

Having those relationships with individual students, where he can identify their root misunderstanding, helps him plan for larger whole classes. “You see their motivations,” Allan says. Whereas teachers might wonder what’s holding a student back, in these small sessions, they can dive into the problem. Kids feel less inhibited about asking for help. “One of my students was always timid and I sat with her one-on-one and there was this lightbulb moment,” he recalls. “I was telling her she’s a good reader, and she read with confidence, she and I were laughing, and she was more engaged. Kids become more comfortable, as this is someone who understands and knows me so much, I can share my misunderstandings with that person.”

Technology

Another key focus of the school’s model is to take full advantage of available technology to better individualize learning. Each flex room has a cart with laptops that are loaded with various programs that enable students to work at their own pace. For ELA, the staff uses iReady, ReadingPlus and ThinkCERCA. Through iReady, students receive instruction at their own level. The online lessons, which are tied to Common Core standards, cover reading, phonological awareness, phonics, high-frequency words, vocabulary, and comprehension in both literature and informational texts. Students’ progress is monitored as they are assessed at the end of each lesson. ReadingPlus focuses on helping students become successful silent readers, while ThinkCERCA aims to build students’ close reading, writing and critical thinking skills. (The “CERCA” stands for make Claims, support with Evidence from text, clearly explain Reasoning, identify Counterarguments and address appropriate Audience.)

For math, students frequently access STMath, which refers to Spatial-Temporal Math. The program aims to improve mathematical comprehension through visual learning. STMath is game-based to better engage students. At the middle school level, it features grade-level content, but also allows for intervention for students below level. The students are expected to use STMath two to three times a week, O’Neil says. They also use TenMarks, which helps them access core math concepts in a variety of ways. Hints and video lessons are available to help struggling students through the questions. Students also receive immediate feedback.
While the rollout of the technology program was not without its bumps, O’Neil says staff members have identified the areas where they want to push technology in the future. Most importantly, they want to expand the school’s emphasis on differentiating to their online instruction. With programs such as ThinkCERCA, it’s important to figure out which students most benefit from that program and target the program to those students, she says. They also want to add systems that enable teachers to fully embrace and analyze all the data that’s available from these programs.

**Data**

The staff regularly monitors data from NWEA and Fountas & Pinnell, which is administered to every student at least three times a year. Baker encourages teachers to assess a student whenever they feel he or she is moving up a level. “The lowest kids—they can be assessed every 3 or 4 weeks easily. It helps them see their growth,” she says. Students track and celebrate their progress on a large bulletin board in the main hallway, titled the “Race to College Readiness.”

The data keeps teachers accountable, and staff members often talk about where they stand with individual students, says teacher Calvin Allan. Teachers are working toward two years of growth for each student, which translates into about 8 letters’ growth according to Fountas & Pinnell. “If someone started with O we want them to get to W, that keeps us accountable,” Allan says. “The kids keep us accountable. They’ll say ‘Hey I’ve only moved up two. Will I get close to growing my 8?’” Students are kept aware of where they are, as they need to have independent reading books at their level.

For math whole-group instruction, students are given teacher-created assessments, and are assessed roughly every 3-4 weeks. They take quizzes in their math small groups as well.

The staff was pleased with the initial data from fall to winter. The team set a goal of 60 percent of students meeting their expected growth, and 61 percent hit it for reading and 67 percent did in math, according to Baker. On average, students made a year’s worth of growth by winter. Baker expects the shift the school made mid-year to strengthen small-group instruction will lead to further growth. “Some of our lowest readers weren’t getting what they really truly needed until we had small-group instruction ramped up at the middle of the year,” Baker says. “That was when we had this breakthrough as a school—we have to teach decoding, we have to teach the building blocks of reading to a huge percentage of our readers, and we’ve seen them grow.”

O’Neil hopes that the staff can find a way to glean all the data being collected from small groups and use that to drive instruction throughout the school day. “When you’re working with the same five kids, and you’re really asking a lot of questions, you’re learning a ton about them that you can’t learn from online programs or assessments,” she says. “We really want to capture that data to inform how each kid learns better.”

**The Next Steps**

As the leadership solidifies the structures needed to support small-group instruction, Baker hopes next to focus on tightening the procedures in every flex room. “You’ll see there are some flex rooms that are more effective,” she says. More observation and feedback around flex time will help teachers improve their technique in small
groups. As leaders focus on establishing the main structures, there hasn’t been a lot of time left over for small-group observations. “Let’s really dig in and make sure that every minute of small-group instruction time is what it should be,” Baker says. “That’s the magic time. That’s how we think about it as a school; this is where the magic happens.”

The team also wants to work on connecting flex time more powerfully to classroom work. In math, the flex time content has been a bit different than the classroom material, as teachers intentionally use the small-group time to address some lacking skills that appear on the NWEA. “There were some geometry and statistics concepts students need to grow on NWEA, but they’re not going to get them in the grade-level curriculum because these are earlier concepts,” Baker explains. In reading, there’s much more of a connection to the classroom work. That’s been helped along with the use of the student conference tracker tool. Flex teachers can add observations about a reader, which the classroom teacher can read and then add his or her own notes.

One takeaway from this first year has been that there is tremendous potential in the small-group emphasis. “I speak personally in being able to see the students I taught learn how to read. It’s incredibly powerful in that way seeing that kind of breakthrough happening across the school,” Baker says. “Had we just done more whole group, direct instruction and tried to get every teacher really great at the skill of pulling a small group in their class, I know we wouldn’t have had the growth we’ve had.”

What it looks like: Room 106

The kids filter in to the room and go right to their assigned spots. Math instructional lead Leah Harris and ELA teacher Calvin Allan are assigned 12 students in this flex time class. Five students will go to Allan for a small group in reading, and three will go to Harris for small-group work in math. In one corner, Harris has desks pushed together to form a big table so everyone is facing each other. Allan has a similar arrangement at the opposite corner of the room.

Around him, two students are reading independently. Another two are on the computer working individually on TenMarks math.

In Allan’s group, he starts off with root word work. He writes a sentence and asks the students to decipher definitions using the root sounds. As he asks them to tackle the word “recycle,” he surveys all five of their expressions. “I like the thinking faces,” he says.

Both of his groups start with 5 to 10 minutes of word work first. “We were noticing through our assessment on Fountas & Pinnell, our own inquiries and homework, that they need word work—not sounding out work, but being able to know that words are common parts, prefixes, root word, suffixes, and being able to understand what a word is and break it down,” Allan says.

Across the room, Harris leads a lesson on angles, working through equations that add up to a 90 degree angle. The three students write their answers on a piece of notebook paper. She has them follow up by writing their answers in a complete sentence. Harris’ eyes shift from paper to paper. She briefly turns to the two students who are reading independently and whispers to them to get on their Chromebooks to start online instruction.

Back at Allan’s group, the students are reading “Seventh Grade” by Gary Soto on their computer screens. He reads aloud with one boy, instructing the student to try to match his teacher’s pace. “You were able to keep up with me,” Allan says, which is met by a big smile from the student. They continue, and when the boy loses the pace, he shakes his head in frustration. Allan offers some words of encouragement, as he scans the papers of the four others in the group who are writing down key words from the text. He shifts back to the entire group. “Why do we make inferences
about what we’re reading?” he asks. Three students raise their hands. “I have three scholars willing to engage with me. I have four, can I get five?” he says, and the reluctant final student raises her hand.

At 2:30 p.m. Allan looks up and casually says “Ready?” to Harris. She nods, and students move silently to their other groups.

For the second session of this flex hour, the 12 students are broken up into a reading group of 5 students that includes Harris’ initial math group, plus two students who were working independently on the computer. Harris has the remaining 7 students in her math group.

She begins by directing her new group to get out a sheet of paper, and quizzing them on the number of degrees in a straight line and on angle pair relationships. She monitors all 7 papers, watching their faces and pencils as they work. One boy pauses and stares at her momentarily, “you’re writing,” she directs him.

One girl stares off, and Harris cold calls her to bring her back to the group. She answers correctly. Harris instructs the group to explain to their elbow partner how they arrived at their answers.

Allan kicks off the second session with word work again, and has identified which student will sit next to him so he can read along with him. The lesson is similar to the first session, and soon the students are logging into their Chromebooks to work on the story “Seventh Grade” as well. In this group, three students are finishing 7th grade and two are entering 7th grade next year.

Allan reprimands one student for not starting up the Chromebook correctly. “You’re not moving with urgency,” he says. He tells them to write out their best guess for what the story will be about, then he checks their sentences. In both groups, within the constant line of sight of their teachers, students are forced to engage, and teachers are constantly checking their understanding.
Lawler discuss her findings, and Lawler pushes her to find more evidence in the text. Tavontay returns and without any instruction, retrieves his white board and pulls out a copy of a story. He starts picking out words and breaking them up into syllables. Lawler gives the other girl two new note cards that will give her something to work on tomorrow.

At 1:30, Colbert announces it’s time to switch, instructing students to go to their next spot and that he’ll adjust them from there.

In her second group, Lawler has Tavontay and two new girls for word work. She prompts them to work on more troublesome words so they will read more fluently. Colbert takes the other two students from Lawler’s first reading group along with the student who was working independently on the computer, delving again into the lesson about shapes. Two students work individually—one girl on math, and another on iReady, listening through headphones to a lesson on prefixes.

At 2 p.m. the second flex time session begins, and new students file in, heading to their assigned spaces. Three teachers and Principal Sarah Hunko Baker will lead 12 students in various small groups. Upon entering the room, teacher David Kanson-Benanav moves the large white board to serve as a divider between his group and Colbert’s. He takes three students and starts working through algebraic equations related to complementary and supplementary angles.

On the other side of the white board, Colbert is working on a shape lesson with two students.

At a table nearby, Baker directs her three students to write three words on their whiteboards that describe their weekend. They discuss a bit, then start breaking words into syllables, settling into words with “-cious” endings. They don’t know the meaning of the word ferocious so Baker gives an example of the word in a sentence. The students try to use the word in a sentence on their white boards. Baker helps one fidgeting boy who has drawn pictures to accompany his sentence redirect his idea into a better sentence. He launches into a whole story of a lion who is ferociously protecting its baby.

Behind them, another student is working on iReady on the computer.

Lawler works with her three students on word patterns. She alerts the other teachers there are only two minutes left. To direct the transition, Baker calls out to the students over the low chatter in the room: "All eyes on me, hands down, transition to group 2." She counts down from 10 to 1 and the students rotate to different teachers.

Baker switches groups with Kanson-Benanav, as Lawler and Colbert also switch groups before launching into similar lessons for the second part of this flex hour.

Baker has her group working on words ending with certain sounds. She has them repeat the sounds aloud, which causes one girl to stumble. Baker continues accentuating the sounds for the girl, while checking each student’s pronunciation.

At the two minute warning, Kanson-Benanav gets down at eye level with the students, stares in each of their faces asking “Do you understand” repeatedly until they can each demonstrate how to correctly solve the problem.
Average years growth
ELA/Math

1

1.71

- Foundations College Prep
- National average