What happens when administrators throw out the rulebook and try fundamentally different models of education?
THE models are all different: In one successful school, kids help choose the lunch plan. In another, classes start at 10 A.M. (with less homework—and more field trips).
And in a third school, physical education happens three times a day, instead of once a week. * Sound like items from a third grader’s wish list? Nope. These are initiatives from real schools where, instead of nibbling at the edges of curriculum and technology, administrators have embraced radically new approaches to the very idea of school itself. We caught up with leaders at three such schools to find out how it’s working out for them—and to show you what you can steal for your own district, without necessarily turning your whole model upside down.

SPARK ACADEMY, LAWRENCE, MA
PUBLIC MIDDLE SCHOOL
A. KEVIN QAZILBASH, PRINCIPAL

THE MODEL: It’s all movement, all the time at Spark Academy, where students get a 40-minute fitness class in the morning, a 25-minute midday recess, and an afternoon athletics period that lasts about an hour.

THE THEORY: The school takes its name from John J. Ratey’s book *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*, which shows the cognitive benefits of exercise for kids. School officials also hope the emphasis on activity will boost student engagement and combat childhood obesity.

“Often in schools, there’s a lot of time when no cognitive change is happening for kids,” says Qazilbash. “They’re staring out the window, not engaged with the work. We tried to come up with a model that optimizes the learning time.”

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE: In addition to the scheduled exercise blocks, students participate in five-minute “sparks”—in-class bursts of activity led by teachers or the students themselves. They’ll do jumping jacks or foot fires (rapidly moving the feet, like football players do), or mine their way through an imaginary trip to downtown Boston, biking through Back Bay, pedaling swan boats in the Public Garden, and hitting baseballs at Fenway Park.

Many classrooms are set up with standing desks, as well as whiteboards where kids can work through problems on their feet.

“Nine out of 10 classes, they’re out of their seats,” says Desiree Daring, a sixth-grade math teacher. A former track runner, Daring has students run laps around her classroom if they seem sluggish.

“My kids are always alert,” Daring says. “They’re always on point. They let out their energy, and when they come back to class [after an exercise block], they’re ready to learn.”

SCHOOLS

BY CALVIN HENNICK

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Spark Academy operates on an extended-day schedule, but instead of taking on extra classes, teachers use students’ exercise blocks for common planning time. Also, they get to participate in the fitness activities once a week, joining their students in the weight room or on the basketball court.

Qazilbash says someone jokingly suggested to him that the school should be sponsored by Axe body spray. The school has only fifth and sixth graders for now, but when it grows to add a seventh and eighth grade, the older kids might get more of their exercise toward the end of the day. “We figure with a change of shirts, strategic scheduling, and a lot of deodorant, we might be okay,” Qazilbash says.

RESULTS: During the school’s first year, fifth graders scored 20 percentage points higher on their state standardized math test than the district average for fifth graders. Also, students posted a 97 percent attendance rate, one of the highest in the district.

WHAT YOU CAN STEAL: Even if you’re not able to add more periods of P.E., you can still capture the benefits of exercise by encouraging teachers to incorporate short, in-class spars—especially in the middle of longer learning blocks. “Just to have a break in the middle of class, where you get their heart rates up for a few minutes, that’s certainly something that can stimulate kids and get them back on track for learning,” Qazilbash says.

HOWARD GARDNER SCHOOL
ALEXANDRIA, VA
PRIVATE MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL
ERICK JOHNSON, HEAD OF SCHOOL

THE MODEL: Classes average around eight students and start at 10 A.M., and kids are in the classroom only three days a week. Tuesdays are reserved for field trips (called “field studies”), and students spend their Fridays either participating in internships or on service-learning projects. Homework is limited.

THE THEORY: The school was purposely kept small to prevent social cliques from forming (enrollment in the high school is capped at 48 students). The late start time is the result of research showing that adolescents’ brains stay in “sleep mode” during the early morning, and the field studies and internships are aimed at making learning relevant to students.

The reduced homework load stems from a desire to prevent students from cementing bad habits if they haven’t fully mastered the material. “We might give a third or less of the homework load that you’re going to see elsewhere,” says Johnson. “The idea that homework is a learning tool is a bit of a fallacy. Homework is practice.”

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE: “The community aspect of the school is hugely valuable,” says Johnson, adding that the small size allows the school to do things that larger schools can’t—like giving students time to collaboratively rewrite the school’s constitution each year.

Hope Peele, who attended the school and now works there as a health teacher and internship coordinator, says the small community helped prepare her to handle roommates and to work effectively with different types of people in college. “If you go to a school of 50 people, you have to know how to deal with that,” she says.

The limited homework load, Johnson says, leads to more project-based and experiential learning. Teachers also give students multiple chances to show their mastery of material, and students who receive poor grades on exams can show their understanding in other ways.

A service-learning program at a homeless shelter might lead students to discuss issues such as why charity exists in a country with social welfare programs, Johnson says. For field trips, the school frequently takes advantage of its proximity to the nation’s capital. Some internships are office-based, but students have also interned in the kitchen and the party-planning office of a local caterer. One student with an interest in alternative medicine interned at a new age shop.

The late start time shows on kids’ faces, Johnson says. “People are not droopy-eyed. We don’t waste that first couple of hours of the day.”

But even 10 A.M. is too early for some kids. “One student is very adamant that night school is the way to go,” Peele says. “He thinks we should start at 5 P.M. and get out at midnight.”

RESULTS: Ninety-seven percent of seniors are admitted into their first-choice college, Johnson says. Also, students’ performance on standardized tests improves the longer they attend the school. Students who have been with the Howard Gardner School for four semesters score 13 percentage points higher than their peers who have been at the school for only one semester.

WHAT YOU CAN STEAL: You can’t make your school smaller, and you probably can’t start classes at 10 A.M., either. But some districts around the country are rescheduling their busings to push the high-school start time back by 20 or 30 minutes.

You can also incorporate service learning and internships, even if you don’t set aside two days each week for all students to participate in.

Johnson says one idea other schools can borrow is to reserve homework solely for practicing mastered skills: “Homework is not a teaching tool, and it is not: an assessment.”

THE ODYSSEY SCHOOL, DENVER
K-8 CHARTER SCHOOL
MARICIA FULTON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

THE MODEL: In addition to their regular academic classes, students participate in two “expeditions” each year, devoting 90 minutes a day to interdisciplinary units that explore real-world applications of learning.

THE THEORY: The Odyssey School is one of more than 160 schools in the nationwide Expeditionary Learning network, which aims to make learning more relevant to kids. “Expeditionary Learning sets up a defining metaphor, that learning should be a journey with a purpose,” says Scott Hartl, chief executive of the organization. “It should be adventurous and rigorous.”

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE: Students frequently venture outside the classroom, while at other times, experts are brought into the classroom to speak.

During an expedition on the foundations of government, fourth and fifth graders learned about key events in colonial America and school integration, but they also studied school equity in their own city and shared their conclusions with school board members. “They said, ‘We think this is not really about choice, this is about what you can afford and where you live,’ ” recalls Fulton. “They were deep in knowledge. They had looked at real data.”

During an expedition about health, nutrition, and biology, students decided they were not happy with warmed, plastic-wrapped hamburgers being served at lunchtime. They made a presentation to the school board, arguing that Odyssey should opt out of the citywide school lunch program.
"The board, partially because of what the kids said...did make that decision," says Liza Eaton, an instructional coach at the school. "I think that is definitely engaging to a lot of kids, when the work that they're doing matters."

For an expedition that was centered around economics, seventh and eighth graders developed their own products as well as their own business plans, which were then critiqued by local businesspeople. The students went on to pitch their ideas to lenders, and those who received funding brought their products to a two-week in-school market, selling them to staff members and students' families.

Students sold origami kits, skateboard lessons, printed T-shirts, and homemade candles. The hottest item: decorative bowls made from melted and reshaped vinyl records. Fulton happily forked over $10 for one, which she uses to store her decks of cards.

The kids paid back their lenders and raised an additional $4,500, which they in turn lent to borrowers in the developing world through the microfinancing site Kiva.org.

"It was high stakes for these kids," Fulton says. "They were excited and nervous and proud. They didn't read about the standards—they lived them."

RESULTS: A Mathematica Policy Research study of schools in the Expeditionary Learning network showed that over the course of three years, students made seven months of additional reading growth and 10 months of additional math growth, above the growth demonstrated by their peers.

WHAT YOU CAN STEAL: Fulton recommends starting with science and humanities standards when trying to show students how their content applies to the real world. Even if you don't have 90 minutes a day to set aside for special expeditions, that doesn't mean you can't try to make learning relevant to kids—whether through field trips, guest speakers, or simply a class discussion about how the material in a textbook relates to the outside world.

"If teachers believe that relevance is important for kids to engage, they will find relevance," Fulton says. "It doesn't require extra money. It requires a shift in your mind-set."