

Administrators Most Frequently Asked Questions

Can basal reading series be used with Four-Blocks?

Four-Blocks doesn't do any basal-bashing! Basals earned a bad reputation at the swing of the pendulum when educators moved away from teaching discrete skills. When educators moved into whole language or teaching skills and strategies in the context of real reading and writing, then most basal publishers responded to the research and to the wishes of their consumers. In recent years, most companies have put together series that appear more like anthologies of good literature. For schools/districts that have chosen to use basal reading series, they feel fortunate in a couple of ways: 1) They now have access to multiple copies of multiple titles for use in Guided Reading Block, especially for the days designated as "grade-level" days. 2) Within the teacher's manuals, teachers have a great deal of their work done for them for planning Four-Blocks lessons. They just have to learn to pick and choose wisely and to plug the lessons in where they are appropriate. Schools that use the basal readers must also invest in the materials in Guided Reading Block that must be used on the below level reading days.

Be sure in choosing a series that the series is compatible with the philosophy and theories on which Four-Blocks is based. There are a few that are not compatible in one way or another.

The fact that basals can be used does not mean that they must be used. Schools that are literature-based must purchase multiple class sets of texts and must find adequate supplies of grade-level and easier text.

Could the use of centers facilitated by the classroom teacher provide this balanced approach to literacy rather than having the teacher address the whole group?

First, centers don't usually provide direct instruction for children. Many centers, in fact, could actually be regarded as "glorified" worksheets: they keep students busy, they are

sometimes entertaining, and they can offer opportunities to practice skills and concepts. Centers **don't** teach! Centers cannot effectively replace good sound instruction. If kids could learn as effectively through centers, then bring on the robots! Also, the management issue should be raised again—not just time management but also the logistics involved. Planning centers, setting them up, and orchestrating who goes where is time-consuming to say the least. The classroom is its busiest during center time, often with the teacher torn in several different directions. It seems much more difficult in this environment for the teacher to evaluate where each child is on the learning continuum and how that level of learning should impact future instruction. And, this on-going evaluation is what should be shaping instruction.

In summary, the answer is “no” to this one! Centers can reinforce what has been learned and gained during the blocks, but certainly can not serve as a substitute for what is done with the whole class during 4-Blocks.

Could the blocks be taught by different teachers? Could the children move to different teachers for the different blocks so that teachers could plan and focus on just one area of Four-Blocks?

The best scenario is definitely one teacher teaching all the blocks. 4-Blocks is so much more effective and beneficial to children when a teacher helps students make content and curricular connections. Good Four-Blocks teachers will integrate their instruction among the blocks and with the other content that they're teaching. Without a great deal of planning and coordination among several teachers, the opportunities for such rich connections might be lost. And, these connections are so important! They are what make learning fun and more meaningful for students.

Another critical defense of keeping all four blocks with the same teacher involves the constant informal evaluation of students that is accomplished by the teacher. The evaluation and assessment process is constant throughout instruction and the information is used for more effectively planning mini-lessons for the whole class and lessons that

individually address the needs of each student. For example, during Self-Selected Reading Block, teachers conference with each student over the course of the week, constantly gathering information. If students read aloud during their individual conferences and demonstrate that they have no strategies for tackling unknown words, then a teacher is likely to use that information to plan appropriate activities for the Words Block—maybe more Guess the Covered Word activities to be sure that students think through common strategies. This is true of the connections made among the other blocks as well. If one teacher is providing the constant, on-going evaluation, that teacher is more likely to see the students holistically—how they perform in each subject area throughout the day. We know that it's unlikely that students will perform equally well in all subject areas. One teacher gets to see it all and then puts the pieces of the puzzle together so that the needs can be met appropriately.

There is also a good bit of research that says that one teacher best serves primary students. It's hard enough sometimes for students to feel comfortable learning the routines for one teacher much less two, three, or four teachers. Every teacher has different routines, different expectations, and different personalities (just as students do!). We want students to reach a level of comfort with the teacher as early as possible in the school year and to retain that comfort level. So much easier to do with one teacher!

Yes, it's true that planning one block takes far less time and effort and that with all that teachers are required to do saving time may be appealing. However, consider the trade-off—that your instruction may not be as effective and that your results may not be as desirable.

If we have spelling books, can they be a part of our Words Block?

You won't want to use your spelling books in the traditional way. Four-Blocks has such activities that are far more effective and engaging than the spelling book series.

However, especially in the absence of a spelling curriculum, you might choose to use your spelling book to guide some of your planning for the Working with Words Block. It's likely built around many of the patterns that we'll be teaching in the Words Block.

You can get ideas from the book and words with the same patterns to use in your activities. Occasionally, you might find a good reinforcement exercise in the spelling book that's appropriate for what you're teaching. But, for the most part, begin to wean your school from the spelling book.

If we don't send home the traditional list of spelling words, won't parents complain?

Most parents will miss the lists because they have seen helping their children memorize these words as their role. Learning spelling words isn't intimidating, even to parents who don't have fond memories of school themselves. They really enjoy this role, and we don't want them to feel left out. Substitute more productive, constructive homework in spelling instead of the lists to memorize. Use the homework books for Making Words (Carson-Dellosa). Send home the rime patterns you've been studying and ask that they work with their children to make more words that use those patterns. Be creative in getting them involved and begin to educate them about what is really important about spelling—the *how*, not the *what*!

What do we do with all of these books we've spent so much time leveling and organizing before we made the switch to Four-Blocks?

First of all, it's true that you don't need to level books in a 4-Blocks classroom. That doesn't mean that there's no benefit to having the materials you've amassed and to having the knowledge of how to level them.

If you know how to level, then you're aware of the distinctions book to book that would make text appropriate for a particular student. That's what leveling is all about—matching kids to text appropriately. You've developed expertise to know the characteristics of text that make it hard or easy for students. When a student comes to you during Self-Selected Reading Block with a book that he's struggling with, you'll know why he's struggling, and you'll work to help him make more appropriate book choices. If a student has developed a habit over a couple of weeks of bringing books to the conference that are way too easy, you'll recognize that and know how to help him make a book selection that's more of a challenge. You will guide each student confidently.

You won't want to keep the books as you've previously organized them. There are several reasons for this. First and foremost, having students assigned to read from particular crates of books or requiring them to reach only for books with red dots on them clearly labels children. You might as well put them back into ability groups! At the very heart of 4-Blocks is the philosophy that we CAN teach kids to read without labeling them. Labels not only draw academic lines between kids (with gaps that grow wider and wider), but labels also draw social and emotional lines between kids. That just doesn't happen in a 4-Blocks classroom. If you've got distinguishing labels on books, fine. Just don't require that kids read those books exclusively.

Put your investment of the time it took you to organize those materials to your advantage. Take a few of the books from the different levels, and put a range of levels in each of the book baskets that will go out to the tables during Self-Selected Reading Block. Now you'll be assured that you've got a range of books that will match the range of abilities in each of your cooperative settings. All of your tables or groups should be composed of high, average, and low achieving students. So, you'll want to have books that meet those needs. Your leveled crates help you have the perfect range of books!

Next, your experience in leveling materials comes to the rescue during Guided Reading Block. So many teachers say that they have to rely solely on a basal text to find their grade-level days of reading because, again, they're insecure in knowing how to find material that is considered grade-level. In some schools and some classrooms, the grade-level reading isn't truly grade-level, where students are mostly higher or lower performing than is considered grade-level. What to use if you can't be guided by a basal? You have that expertise! You can look at any materials and any group of students and know how to find the perfect (or almost perfect!) match!

Here's another good use of the leveled sets of books. If several teachers in a school have leveled sets of books, they might agree to combine the small sets so that there are larger collections for the Guided Reading Block. For example, if Teacher A has 6 copies of a title, Teacher B has 6 copies (same title), Teacher C has 6 copies (same title), and

Teacher D has a 6-pack set (again, same title), then these teachers can trade their small sets and create a class set of 24 books. If they have several of these 6-pack sets on several titles, they regroup them, and then they rotate the use of the class set, so that everyone still gets to teach each title.

So, leveled books and your knowledge of how to level them now works to your advantage in a Four-Blocks classroom!