Making Smarter Use of Time

By Alyson Klein

Schools are constantly fighting for more resources: money, effective teachers, facilities. But one pivotal factor in student learning and child development isn’t often on the negotiating table: Time.

The benefits of strategies like pushing back high school start times, hiring more and reading early in the day for elementary school students, and making sure students get a break to process their learning, have been documented in a deluge of research studies and championed by prominent organizations like the American Academy of Pediatrics and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But many schools aren’t putting that advice into action, an Education Week survey of school and district leaders conducted in December found. Less than half—41 percent—of those surveyed said their district had examined what brain science research says about learning and used that information to guide or inform scheduling or start times.

The problem—teachers, administrators, and experts say in interviews—is the system itself.

Changing start times means rearranging transportation, teacher schedules, extracurricular activities, and sports, and getting community groups on board. Sorting academicians to the best time of day for students of different strengths and different ages is an almost insurmountable logistical challenge.

Giving students a breather—or even recess—takes...

Academic Coaches
Keep High School Athletes in Play

By Stephen Sawchuk

Cincinnati high school math teacher Jill Ruby is a second coach of sorts for a group of students who are already answerable to the adults who school them on the techniques, rules, and strategies of the sport they play.

At Heights STEM High School, she has a caseload of about 30 athletes whose grades and attendance patterns she checks on a weekly basis. If any of them have an F or two D-level grades, she devises a plan with them to pull up those marks—including attending after-school study sessions, prompting them to communicate with their teachers about making up missed work, or putting them in touch with someone who can tutor them on a tough literature concept.

In her coaching role, Ruby has helped students apply to colleges and even fill out the FAFSA.

“It has been the highlight of my year so far, getting to connect with kids and getting them to grow academically and persevere through the struggles they’ve been having,” Ruby said.

Each of the Cincinnati district’s 14 high

When It’s Hard
To Really Love
That Student

By Madeline Will

Decades of research—and conventionally held wisdom—say that positive teacher-student relationships matter. But do you really have to love every student? And what if you don’t?

“We go into teaching with the idea that we’re going to love our students, we’re going to be like the teachers in the movies... All of the kids are going to be motivated, there’s going to be a soundtrack, it’s going to be amazing,” said Vickie Crockett, a high school English/language arts teacher in Atlanta. “I think we allow ourselves to get boxed into the idea that we’re just going to fall magically in love with all of these disparate personalities that come into our classroom.”

But the reality is not quite like the movies. As most teachers can attest, some students are challenging. They might be disruptive, or disengaged, or even rude. Some might genuinely dislike their teacher for reasons outside of the teacher’s control.

Strong student-teacher relationships, however, are linked to both short-term and...

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Time Norms Sometimes Fail Students

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precious minutes away from mastering material that will be measured on standardized tests. And states often step in with mandates, dictating just how many hours of instruction students must receive, and in which subjects.

"Teachers and administrators have super-hard jobs in a system that is often quite dysfunctional," said Daniel Pink, the author of The: "Secrets of Perpetual Motion," who has been lecturing school groups in the best use of time.

What's more, many educators are too busy juggling their demanding day-to-day tasks to pour over academic studies, he added.

"I don't think the research is that widely known," Pink said. "Education changes slowly, but it certainly changes based on research." David Naylor, the principal of Mosel Laboratory School in Richmond, Va., which is slated to try out a new schedule next year based on research highlighted in Pink's book, added one more thing to the list: "I think because of high-stakes testing and accountability, more and more people are afraid to step outside the box, because they think, if it doesn't work, what kind of impact will it have on our scores, how will it reflect on teachers, how will it reflect on the school and community?" Naylor said. "As we are trying to evolve our education system, we have to have the freedom to try something new without feeling like there's going to be some adverse consequence to it."

Start Times

One of the most powerful—but most difficult—changes for schools to make: starting high school later.

The majority of educators in the survey said their high schools started before 8:30 a.m., the earliest time recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics. In fact, just five percent of schools surveyed start between 8:31 and 9 a.m. That's despite the fact that the research— from medical professionals, educators, and academics—is crystal clear: Middle and high school students learn best when they get to school a bit later.

For instance: Pushing back the school start time, one hour later for middle school students led to a three-point jump in reading and math scores for the average student, according to a study of data from all middle schools in Wake County, N.C., conducted by Finley Edwards, an assistant clinical professor of economics at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. What's more, he found that the effect was magnified for the lowest-performing students.

"By Edwards' back-of-the-envelope calculations, if a district decided to start all its students at the same time—say 8 a.m.—it would mean nothing about an extra 10 percent per student a year. "The overall balance is very strongly in favor of pushing school start times later," Edwards said. "The payoff that you get is swaps so many other things."

It isn't just about "increasing learning." Teenagers tend to have trouble falling asleep and get their most productive, so-called "dream sleep" in the early morning hours.

"Waking a teenager at 7 a.m. is like waking up an adult at 4 a.m.," said Scott E. Carroll, a professor of economics at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who studied the impact of later start times at the Air Force Academy and found that earlier start times contributed to lower grades among students in early adolescence and late adolescence. They are

Research Notes

Does a Double- or Triple-Dose Class Help Students Learn?

Research notes in this section by Sarah D. Suesse

Intensive, "double-dose" math and reading blocks have become a popular intervention for struggling students, but the evidence on the intervention is somewhat mixed. Much of the research on double-dose math and reading classes has centered on particular urban programs, such as those in Chicago and San Diego. One longitudinal study of Chicago students found a double-dose algebra class significantly improved students' test scores, credits earned, and high school graduation rates, but the benefits partly depended on how differently teachers used the time when in a typical class. For example, the math block focused on verbally exploring math concepts, and the study found students with low reading skills saw the greatest benefits from the class. But a Stanford University study of Miami middle schools found that short-term gains from participating in a double-block of math were halved a year later and completely gone by two years; those researchers estimated that opportunity costs of missing other classes may outweigh students' short-term math gains. Grade level may matter, too. In San Diego, University of California researchers found a double-dose "literacy block" and a single-length "иться block" raised middle school students' reading achievement significantly, but in high school, English learners lost as much as 4.9 percentile points for every year they participated in the literacy blocks.
What's in the Way of Change?

By Mark Lieberman

A growing body of research provides evidence that schools can benefit from rethinking their schedules, whether by pushing the start time to later in the day, eliminating one day a week, or otherwise reshuffling how students and teachers spend their time together.

Before districts and schools can pull the trigger on a massive change, though, they’re likely to face a wide variety of obstacles and barriers. Some of them are merely a byproduct of well-established norms and traditions around schooling, including an outdated agrarian calendar. Others reflect deeper insecurities among groups of people with a stake in the success of a school’s approach.

Education Week talked to school leaders who have attempted with varying degrees of success to rethink schedules, and to advocates and organizations that work with schools on facilitating significant change. Barriers to those changes tend to fall in the following six categories:

Staff and support staff

Teachers approach planning their lessons by filling the available time they have. If that amount of time changes, teachers might build at having to come up with a new approach to covering the material. A schedule change can be even stickier if it substantially changes teachers’ hours or responsibilities, which could mean a lengthy renegotiation of a teachers’ union contract and a test battle over a wide range of specifics.

Meanwhile, support staff, from sanitation and culinary workers to bus drivers and crossing guards, can feel the effects of a schedule change—and if those workers aren’t full-time employees, a small shift in their hours and duties can make a major difference in their well-being.

Though teacher objections are an obstacle, the conditions in which most teachers work are inherently hostile to innovation, argues Bryan Hassel, the co-president of Public Impact, a nonprofit working with school districts to help them make better use of time. He advocates more collaboration to cut down on wasted time and redundancy during the school day.

“If the teachers on the team see themselves as a team working together with these 100 kids, there’s much more of a chance to say, ‘I can specialize in what I do best; together we’ll do better than we would at each time by ourselves,’” Hassel said.

Cost of change

Even if everybody involved wants to make a change, finding the time and money to plan and execute it is another matter entirely. Many school districts lack the budget and resources to devote to planning a complex operation. Some schools, too, have failed to garner public support for changing the schedule because no nearby school systems have done something similar. Leadership is a factor as well—building trust with parents and teachers takes years, which means a new administrative team can’t simply sweep in and make enormous changes right off the bat.

Jennifer Davis, the president and co-founder of the National Center for Time and Learning, has seen in her organization’s recent advocacy work more enthusiasm for deviating from the norm—but not without relevant nearby examples.

“That ability to network, to ask advice, to look at data, to learn from others that are holding similar roles in the community is hugely valuable,” Davis said. “The comfort level is much higher when you can go to visit a district that has already done it for a school.”

Concerns and objections from parents

Chris Fiedler, the superintendent of School District 27 in northeast Colorado, got firsthand experience navigating parents’ emotions when he led several meetings in advance of the group’s decision to start the school day even later, at 8:30 a.m., during the high school early in 2017, and again, to move to a four-day week in 2018 amid budget cuts.

“Some people started questioning it. ‘Oh my God, my kid is going to sleep in to eight o’clock. I think he’s going to be too tired,’” Fiedler said. “They later came around, he said, but not before a new approach to soliciting community feedback in person: “It was changing in the community, but they told us, if you want to yell at us, yell on your feedback sheets.”

Athletics and extracurriculurs

Though they’re ancillary to the core of the school day, after-school activities play a major role in the daily lives of students and the formation of local communities. Sports, band, and other schedules are often set by institutions distinct from the schools themselves, necessitating ample practice and rehearse time outside school hours. Pushing those activities later in the day, for instance, can leave students with less time than they otherwise have to complete homework and get adequate rest.

In 2017, then-Superintendent Tommy Chang of the Boston school district proposed an ambitious plan to start many schools later and align start times across the district. The effort failed for a variety of reasons, including some he didn’t anticipate. “A challenge was the logistics of changing school schedules for after school specifically was tied to specific schools. So when a school changes the start time, the end time also changes, thus the nonprofits were also being affected,” Chang said. “We were thinking about our immediate end users, parents, and stakeholders. Nonprofits are a secondary stakeholder group.”

Transportation

If school starts at a different time from before, it’s no simple matter to rearrange bus schedules accordingly. Many districts have a fixed number of available buses that have to run on a strict timetable to meet the demands of various schools. Some districts even share buses with other districts, further complicating logistics.

When former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie in 2014 pushed school districts in the state to consider revising start times, the Freehold Regional High School district came up against a fairly concrete obstacle, according to Superintendent Charles Sampson.

“We have six high schools. We ran them on different start-time schedules to accommodate our tiered busing. We met with state officials to take a look at going to one uniform start date,” Sampson said. “When we dug into it, it looked like it was going to be an additional $6 to $10 million in busing costs. It was purely a financial barrier—$6 to $10 million wasn’t materializing out of thin air.”

Policy mandates

The codified rules at the district, local, and even state levels can stand in the way of rethinking schedules. Faxed dates for state testing leave schools with limited opportunities to radically reduce the structure of the school year. State-mandated caps on class size and the amount of time students spend with nonteaching personnel can thwart plans to engage students differently throughout the day.

Smaller districts with minimal resources feel the effects of certain policies particularly strongly. John Unger, the principal of West Fork Middle School in Arkansas, said his school is required by the state to offer music classes to all 8th graders, but his middle school shares its music teachers with the high school. “It told us only have one hour a day that teacher is available, we’re stuck, we’re handcuffed to what we can offer,” Unger said.

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