

Think Inside the Clock

Education policies almost always have time requirements, and it doesn't take many policies before the available time runs out. But by using some creative planning techniques, schools can save time and money, too.

By Marilyn Crawford

More schools than ever are not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress, and budget cuts are going to make resources for reforms even more scarce. School districts cannot afford to continue a reform agenda unless they can align practices with policies — and vice versa. That alignment begins with how schools use time.

Based on 10 years of experience as a school administrator in the early years of Kentucky's reforms and on eight years providing technical assistance to districts and state education departments in eight states, I've learned where and why policies involving time don't fit practice. Moreover, my experience shows that a deliberate strategy of aligning the two can provide supports for teachers, such as professional development time in the school day, even as budgets are reduced.

COMMON TIME PROBLEMS

The quantity of requirements dumped on the traditional use of time in schools has created a dramatically unrealistic and unwieldy environment for teaching and learning. These are some of the problems encountered by most districts:

The math doesn't work. Often, there simply is not enough time available. Schools and districts are held accountable for policies that require more time than is available. Policy requirements are huge, while time is short. When the dust settles, there are many more requirements than can be implemented, leaving mandates mathematically impossible for school leaders.

Practitioners must negotiate changes with an eraser in hand, slowly eliminating barriers that implementation exposes.

Take, for example, the requirement that all students be proficient in math. Look at the number of standards schools are expected to teach within the time allowed. Then do the math. Here's one example. If a school has 45-minute class periods for 180 days a year, teachers have a maximum of 135 hours of teaching time per course. The actual time for teaching is shorter, and many districts I've worked with estimate that no more than 80% of that time is usable. Early dismissals, assemblies, testing, and other interruptions eat into instructional time. Using this estimate, schools are left with 108 hours of class time. If each course were divided into six-hour instructional days, the teacher would have 18 days of total class time per course. This means three to four weeks to teach algebra to entering 9th graders who may be way behind in math. Or, expressed another way, a student who is required to study four years of math in order to graduate will actually have three to four months to learn all of the math standards. Enough time to meet the volume of expectations, especially for struggling students? I think not.

Policies involving time develop in tidy silos, but in practice they become more like a stewpot. Huge numbers of policies involve time. In fact, *most* policies involve time — some overt, others not. If you look closely, you'll find that policies generally require someone to do something that takes time — school time, staff time, student time, district time. Viewed in isolation, each policy can appear quite reasonable, yet when they interact with one another at the site lev-

el, a very different reality emerges.

Let's look at three distinct policies that existed in one district — teacher work load, course requirements, and class size caps. The contract required no more than 6½ hours in the student day, with at least 45 minutes for daily prep and an additional 45 minutes for lunch. Students are required to take eight courses per year. When these two policies were combined, the schools ended up with one schedule choice — a block schedule. In a block schedule, teachers teach only 75% of the time, and class sizes tend to go up. Yet the union contract also specified a maximum class size of 25, a number that would have required an impossible increase in the budget formula. Thus, district personnel had to decide which policy to fail to implement or to change because the time requirements became impossible when all of the policies were combined.

Policies are aligned with two competing goals. Time cannot serve both masters. Business uses the term “follow the money,” but schools have a different economy: time. If you want to get a window into a school's core values and identify competing goals, look at how schools allocate and use time. In *Updraft-Downdraft*,¹ we identified two major competing value systems tugging on our high schools. On one hand, policies demand that schools bring all students to proficiency, doing whatever it takes to ensure they meet standards. On the other hand, schools are highly competitive places, with high school GPA and class rank used to determine access to high-status universities and scholarships, thus sorting and selecting students. In other words, schools are asked to align their time around two competing goals.

Which goal is primary? In sites across the country, we asked district and school leadership teams in struggling districts to look at 9th-grade course requirements in relation to their state assessment in literacy. We asked them to answer a simple question for each course: “If students enter this course not proficient in reading, what is the likelihood the teacher will stop and *teach* them to read — high, middle, or low?” Other than specific remedial reading courses, never once have we had any group give a “high” or “medium” response to that question regarding a 9th-grade course. In every instance, teachers responded that there was a “low” probability that they would teach reading in a regular course. Use reading? Most certainly. But teach it, not so much. All together, this shows regular course time is not allocated to achieving the goal of ensuring that all students are proficient. Instead, competition prevails in the 9th grade, as we see with the huge number of failures.

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Time policies are often so rigid that they cause problems. Math inherently tends to be precise. Policies grounded in the mathematics of time can become so specific that they are impossible to implement, particularly across a wide variety of settings.

When auditing time requirements of individualized education plans (IEPs), for example, one district found it mathematically improbable to accommodate every individual plan within any single high school schedule. Some IEPs were written in hours, with students required to have services in a special education support class for one hour per day. Others were written with required daily minutes of various lengths — such as 45 minutes, 50 minutes, 47 minutes. Still others were written in weeks, requiring students to have, for example, 2½ hours of support per week even though the length of each period in that school was 47 minutes. Many other policies limited bell schedule choices. There was so much variance in how IEPs were written that it would be impossible to create a bell schedule that would allow implementation of all IEPs. So while the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires schools to implement time as written in each IEP, the mathematical reality would simply not allow it.

Policies can become barriers that are difficult to lift. Policies usually begin as well-meaning efforts to solve problems. Situations change, but policies rarely do. Subtraction is not a skill of policy makers. Consequently, practitioners must negotiate changes with an eraser in hand, slowly eliminating barriers that implementation exposes.

Consider one of the fundamental principles of the standards movement: fix expectations, then adjust time as needed to allow all students to become proficient. One school tried to implement a flexible secondary schedule, linking English and social studies teachers as partners with two groups of students across two periods. The goal was to integrate the two groups around a literacy core, adjusting time and grouping as instructional strategies. However, teachers ran headlong into a district requirement that teachers record period-by-period attendance, and the district would not budge on that policy. The result: a totally inflexible system that required the practitioners to evade the rule system in a backdoor fashion in order to get the flexibility they needed — and the time their students needed for literacy instruction.

TYING POLICY TO PRACTICE

In the classic approach to forming and implementing policies, policy and practice are isolated. Policy makers take the first step and practitioners go second, both doing more finger pointing than communicating along the way. As a result, the work of policy and practice occurs in isolation, and much goes awry.

Working with a partner district, we are creating a very different process for developing, funding, and implementing policies on time in schools. We use what I call a “policy sandbox,” in which policy makers and policy implementers together can build, change, add to, or start over on developing time-related policies and the budgets needed to implement them. The sandbox offers an opportunity to push the envelope on using time differently in a safe environment (it’s sand, after all). And the sandbox policies can be designed in the contexts of the various schools that have to implement them.



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The principal toy in the sandbox is the master schedule. Policies on time move from idea to reality when school administrators deploy time and personnel via school master schedules, using a fundamental language that is mathematical. Obviously, school officials use master scheduling to deploy school time to various agendas, assign staff time to different efforts, and apportion student time to learning tasks. Less visibly, master scheduling hardwires an instructional

When adopting policy reforms, policy makers often don't do the math.

strategy, designing conditions that either support or constrain successful teaching and learning. For example, high school schedule design strategies might range from the traditional to modifications, such as small schools, to the more radical, such as creating high schools that imitate community college schedules. Each offers users radically different packaging of time in support of teaching and learning. Typically, however, only administrators participate in the actual creation of master schedules while policy makers watch — and hope — their policies take effect.

What helps to maintain a productive conversation between policy makers and practitioners in the sandbox is “scenario planning.” By laying out multiple

strategies possible in a master schedule — from conservative to radical, with all kinds of policy options and their budget realities — policy makers and practitioners can craft reasonable designs for the use of time. Through scenario planning, practitioners have a voice in the development of initial policies, and policy makers gain an understanding of the implementation process.

TRANSLATING TO PRACTICE

How does scenario planning in a policy sandbox actually work? Scenario planning will play out differently in every district, but here is a district-level example of how it worked in one instance.

A superintendent wanted to create K-8 schools as part of a portfolio of school options. Among other goals, her plan included weekly embedded teacher professional development time of at least 90 minutes, preferably more, for all staff. The superintendent’s policies also provided for at least four periods of art, music, and physical education weekly for every student, working up to at least seven periods weekly within three years. Finally, she wanted to create a flexible team design so teachers could adjust time and re-group students as needed to meet their specific needs. Because the district had wide differences in school size and Title I funding, the policies needed to work in widely varying sites and create funding streams with sufficient resources despite ongoing budget cuts.

The first step put policy making in a lead role in the sandbox, supported by practice. The superintendent created her wish list for how schools should use time and personnel. Then, as school practitioner experts, we designed and built sample master schedules, showing what particular policies might look like in practice across the varying sites and with different funding levels. She and her team then had very specific images of their proposed policies in practice, so that they could make adjustments and finalize policies and budgets.

At that point, the work shifted and school leadership teams took the initiative in the sandbox, with the superintendent and central office administrators responding to their work. First, school teams learned to create master schedule scenarios that explored a full range of possibilities for designing strategies around the new time policy requirements. Rather than focusing on a single and final decision, they explored the possibilities and the mathematical limits for their sites. In the process, they also identified policies that created barriers and needed adjustments, as well as options the central office had not considered. By shar-

ing scenarios with central office administrators, the school teams provided feedback that sometimes led to adjustments in the policies. Ultimately, the school teams were able to make plans with a full understanding of their purposes and strengths.

In the next phase, both the central office team and school teams moved out of the sandbox to reality. They worked together to implement their jointly crafted plans and to create master schedules that supported them. The central office team provided technical assistance to schools on deploying time and personnel with greatest efficiency and fidelity to the overall plan. The district removed barriers that surfaced and opened new opportunities as needed. It helped schools maximize the alignment of time with goals for learning and individual student needs. The central office and school teams collaborated on creating research-based strategies for using the embedded professional development time to move student achievement. They also adjusted budgets with precision, saving dollars when schools could operate with greater efficiency, adding dollars only where absolutely needed. For example, we supported schools in learning to control class size by adjusting their master schedules, rather than by adding extra staff, thus saving the district millions. We used scenarios to show the impact of using ESL staff in different ways, thus informing district policy choices. And when we found insufficient funding for professional development time in very small schools, we were able to use scenarios to show the precise level of extra staff needed to add the desired 90 minutes.

Finally, after the school year began and schedules were well under way, we audited the master schedule to show the actual implementation of central policies and budgets at each site, thus establishing a baseline that could be used for the next annual design-implementation cycle.

While this is a district example, we have used a similar sandbox strategy to develop state policies by designing scenarios from sample districts so that policy makers could see the impact of various choices in action.

ADDING IT ALL UP

The standards-based movement and its provisions for accountability are permanent but evolving policies for our country. They are the right way to go for students and the public schools. In adopting these reforms, however, education policy makers did not do their math. They assumed the goals could be met with only slight, if any, tinkering with the time needed, and the realities faced by those trying to implement the demands rarely have been considered. The largest issue for schools is not extending the school day or year — as useful as those policies might be — but of meeting time requirements within the constraints of the budgets and personnel given them.

The policy-talks-to-practice strategy outlined here makes the reforms much more possible. This strategy enables schools and districts to align time to expectations, and scenario planning allows policy makers and practitioners to envision multiple ways to meet policy goals, find extra time for teacher professional development within the budget, and know the price tags for every policy action. It's a good bargain.



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1. Marilyn Crawford and Eleanor Dougherty, *Updraft-Downdraft: Secondary Schools in the Crosswinds of Reform* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2003). **■**

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