4 steps for redesigning time for student and teacher learning

Laying the right foundation for changing the use of time in a school is essential if such a shift is going to be successful.

By Lori Nazareno

"If only we had more time." I've heard (and spoken!) that wistful phrase a thousand times — in reference to student and teacher learning. I'll bet you have too.

But how can educators approach that challenge? If you want to move beyond just complaining about the lack of time to actually rethinking how your school uses time, would you be ready to tackle it?

Deepak Chopra suggests that "luck" doesn't happen in a haphazard way but that we create it by being prepared for potential opportunities (2003). You can prepare for opportunity's knock by learning from the experiences and successes of teacher leaders who have built teams to redesign time in their schools. Sustainable, effective efforts are rarely the result of individual teachers (or administrators) who have pet projects and pursue them independently. As an African proverb reminds, "If you want to go quickly, go alone. But if you want to go far, go together."

Before you embark on any effort to explore how time is being used, begin by building a broad-based team that can do the work.

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As Margaret Wheatley said, "the best way to create ownership is to have those responsible for implementation develop the plan for themselves. . . It doesn't matter how brilliant or correct the plan is — it simply doesn't work to ask people to sign on when they haven't been involved in the planning process" (2006, p. 68). Engaging a range of stakeholders from the beginning will help everyone feel ownership in the exploration and implementation of change.

Your team might include:

- Teacher colleagues who are interested in developing solutions to time-related challenges;
- Students who have valuable perspectives on instructional strategies that are most engaging and feel "worth" their time;
- Parents who know what engages their children and can help build support in the school community for any significant changes;
- Administrators who have a sense of policy possibilities and can help identify additional stakeholders who may need to be engaged; and/or
- Union officials who can provide information about what's possible within teacher contracts.

Through the Center for Teaching Quality, I have learned a great deal from other teacher leaders who have worked to redesign time in their schools. Their process can be explained in four steps with the apt

FIGURE 1.
How is student time used in your classes?

Student time audit

Use one tally mark for each minute you spend on these activities in class.

Time interval (Break your class into **5-minute** blocks of time)	Whole-class instruction	Small group or partner work time	Individual work time	Individual instruction (Teacher helps individual with assignment)	Conferences (e.g., discussing projects and other academic concerns)	Noninstructional (e.g., taking attendance, interruptions, fire drills)	Discipline
Ex. 7:00-7:05 a.m.	𝍸						
TOTAL							

Source: Center for Teaching Quality. www.teachingquality.org/time

Time-tracking resources

Center for Teaching Quality's Toolkit for More and Better Learning Time
Eighty teachers from Massachusetts and Colorado examined school schedules with extended learning time, tracked how time was used in their own classrooms, wrote blogs, and compared school schedules in the United States and internationally. The site includes resources for tracking student and teacher time, sample school schedules and videos, and case studies about schools that have redesigned time.
www.teachingquality.org/time

The National Center on Time and Learning Time Analysis Tools
Users can search resources related to different objectives of redesigning time, whether it's to strengthen core instruction, differentiate for student needs, or enhance school culture or to find time-tracking tools for scheduling, instruction, teacher collaboration, data analysis, enrichment, and intervention.
www.timeandlearning.org/school-resources/tools

Time for Equity's Indicators Framework
The framework includes 24 indicators that schools can use as yardsticks to measure and refine efforts to create expanded and improved learning opportunities. The indicators are organized into four categories that correspond to different stages of implementing expanded learning time: creating and sustaining the conditions; ensuring equitable access and implementation; preparing students for college, career, and civic life; and scaling up.
http://timeforequity.org

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acronym of T.I.M.E.: Taking stock, Investigating options, Modeling possibilities, and Engaging stakeholders in solutions.

Step #1. Taking stock

Why do you need to redesign time at your school? What, exactly, is the problem you're trying to solve? Taking stock involves gathering data about your school's current reality, collecting data to show how students and teachers are affected, and identifying a specific challenge to address. Taking stock should help you develop a compelling argument for change.

Documenting your current reality

Begin with a fact-finding mission in your school. How is time being spent now — on what tasks and with what effect? What time is particularly well-spent? What time is not being used as efficiently as possible? What valuable activities are not possible due to lack of time?

Some examples of inefficient use of student time include long transitions between class periods or activities, numerous intercom announcements, whole-class bathroom breaks, and materials that are difficult to access quickly. Examples of inefficient uses of teacher time include excessive emails and reporting requirements, mandatory meetings that are not directly aligned with student learning, and professional development sessions that are not personalized for educators' needs. (See Figure 1 for a tool that you can use in your school to learn how student time is being used.)

But merely identifying inefficiencies is not compelling. Instead look at the effect of those inefficiencies on students and teachers, presenting data in a way that tells a story anyone can understand.

For instance, if five minutes of each hour are used inefficiently, that adds up to 175 minutes a week, 700 minutes a month, and 7,000 minutes a year. Those 35 minutes a day amount to nearly 17 days of lost instructional time over the school year. What could your students accomplish with an additional 17 days of instruction?

Consider, too, how time is actually structured in your school. Nearly every school in the United States is, as Sir Ken Robinson says, "made in the image of industrialization." Students move along the school "assembly line" in age-based groups, each allowed exactly one school year to master an identified standards. The length of class periods and the number of school days per year are fixed. In this model, subjects are taught in isolation.

When you're examining time in your school, look not just at individual tasks but at the master framework that organizes the school day, week, and year. Are there efficiencies that could be realized by structuring learning time so it resembles real life — in an integrated and interdependent way?

Numerous free tools can support your team with collecting data, assessing your school's current reality, and redesigning time (see chart above).

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Supplementing with empathy data

Hard data cannot tell the whole story of what the human beings in your school need. How can you get past the numbers to gather more robust information about what's happening in your school? Collect "empathy data."

If you've ever used design thinking protocols, this term may sound familiar. Empathy data lets problem solvers learn from individuals who use the system they're trying to improve. Depending on what you want to learn, that might be students and/or teachers.

You can collect empathy data in a variety of ways:

- Shadow or observe a teacher or student for a given period of time, preferably an entire day. How do they spend their time? How much time is spent on task? How deeply engaged are they in the work at hand? How many interruptions are wasting time? What activities are not aligned with learning? What are they? Why does that happen?
- Interview users about their experience and use of learning time. "Tell me about a time when you were really engaged in your learning. What were you doing? How were you working? How much time did you have to do that work?"
- Ask users to draw a map of their learning experiences and time. What does this representation tell you about their experience?

If you need more ideas or more guidance about how to pursue collecting empathy data, check out www.designkit.org/methods.

Synthesizing to identify needs

Analyze your data and pinpoint specific needs you want to address by redesigning time. The central question for your team: What problem(s) are you trying to solve?

For example, your team might arrive at insights like these:

- There is sufficient time, but it is just not being used well to meet student and/or teacher needs.
- The amount of time is insufficient to meet the needs of students who would benefit from enrichment activities.
- Students need more time to engage in field experiences or shadowing opportunities.
- Teachers need more collaborative time for planning.
- Teachers need more time to engage in leadership and activities that help them spread their expertise.
- The current schedule prevents your school from creating a learner-centered environment where students advance at their own pace and can drive their own learning based on interests.

Step #2. Investigating options

Once your team has a sense of the current reality in your school and the specific need(s) you're trying to address, the next step is exploring possible solutions. Fortunately, many schools are implementing new and innovative ways to structure and use time. Learning what's already in place can help your team go much faster and further. Of course, no silver-bullet model will work for all schools. Even if you find a promising model that's meeting similar needs elsewhere, you'll probably still need to adapt it.

Depending on the need(s) you've identified, your team might already have a sense of how to describe your solution(s). Here are a few examples:

- Extending the school day or year;
- Reducing or eliminating wasted time;
- Providing real-world experiences for students; and/or
- Designing a learning environment that supports students to advance at their own pace.

Each of these solutions, of course, could be implemented in a variety of creative ways so do your homework on what other schools have tried.

Be open to how you pursue your solution. For example, "extending the school day or year" doesn't have to mean changing the length of the teacher workday or year. Another option might be staggering teacher schedules so that some start the school day or year earlier than others. Generation Schools Network (http://generationschools.org/core-elements.html) has taken this approach and also involves school staff and community volunteers who teach so-called intensives.

For additional examples and case studies, see the CTQ More and Better Learning Time Toolkit: www.teachingquality.org/time.

Step #3: Modeling and testing possibilities

With your identified need and potential solution in hand, your team is ready to build and test a model. Rather than investing time and effort in a large-scale trial, develop a scaled-down prototype of your proposed solution to test with users and other stakeholders. For example, you might outline a new schedule and share it with others for feedback. Or your team might work with colleagues to try a new schedule with a grade level for a week or a month to see how it goes.

Prototyping gives your team a low-risk opportunity to learn lessons and improve your plan. For example, if you're trying a new schedule that incorporates block periods for part of the day, you might discover unanticipated conflicts with internships, athletics, or something else. Identifying and troubleshooting challenges during a testing phase lets your team adjust before full-scale implementation, which makes success more likely.

Critical to this part of the development process is collecting and analyzing feedback from your colleagues and others who may be involved or affected by the shift. A simple way to collect feedback is to ask users to complete the following sentence stems: "I like . . . , I wish . . . , I wonder . . . " Incorporating this feedback into the next iteration can help you broaden ownership for the idea.

Several rounds of testing and reiteration can help ensure that a new model is vetted for a large-scale rollout. Most likely, unanticipated challenges will arise, regardless of how much testing you do. As you focus on solutions, keep in mind the empathy data and draw upon the community's shared ownership of the work.

Step #4: Engaging stakeholders

Realizing your team's plan — and sustaining the shift — will require engaging stakeholders who are influential in its implementation and long-term success. This might include colleagues who were not on the design team, parents, district staff, and other community members.

As you've probably experienced with students, making a big change can go awry quickly if community members don't understand the reason for the change or how it will affect them. Consistent, clear communication is key.

Your team will need to strategize about and test ways to explain the changes and possibly do a short road test of key messages. You'll want to determine, for example, whether shifts will be announced or whether stakeholders will be invited to offer feedback. Your team should anticipate questions and concerns that may arise and be prepared to respond with possible compromises or explanatory data.

Communicate (and respond) in ways that indicate you have invested time and thought in considering others' perspectives and that the team's decisions were influenced by multiple viewpoints. You may want to be explicit about how the empathy data that you gathered earlier in the process is incorporated into the planned solution.

Final thoughts

This process pursues a logical sequence that can help your team feel prepared when an opportunity arises to rethink how time is used in your school.

Approach this work as you would any new teaching strategy: Use your best judgment and be flexible about accommodating unanticipated events. The data you collect may not point toward a compelling case for changing how time is used. Building your own model may require several iterations and major revisions. Through all of this work, keep your focus on why changing how time is allocated was important to you in the first place, and keep refining until your approach serves the best interests of students and teachers. K

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"Three Ds and a C — hashtag grounded."