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What Transcripts Reveal About Our Schools' Values, Priorities and Inequities

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If you want to understand a school's values and priorities, look at its transcripts. Like sedimentary rocks, schedules can reveal where—and even why—gaps between student potential and opportunity emerge and where they begin to calcify.

Years from now, when we look back on how the pandemic transformed education, transcripts will read like a “tale of the tape” for how we addressed—and sought to correct—systemic inequities within our schools. Because more than strategic plans, speeches or even vision statements, transcripts show whether we, as school and district leaders, are following through on the promises we’re making to our students.

Transcripts show the courses we offer and whether (and which) students had the time (and opportunity) to take them. They highlight the philosophies we use to determine teacher assignments and course offerings. They reflect the tough compromises that sometimes come at the intersection of aspiration and operation.

At their core, transcripts provide a record of the ways in which our values have been translated into practice through the invisible hand of scheduling. Often overlooked as a lever for equity, schedules form the operational blueprint of our schools. But too often, scheduling decisions have little to do with the capabilities and motivations of students, and more to do with judgment calls made by adult decision-makers.

As school and district leaders prepare to re-open, it will be easy to view scheduling as an operational task—necessary to satisfy parent requests, balance class sizes and ensure mixed student abilities in each class. But as we navigate the complexity of re-opening amidst unprecedented challenges, scheduling may be our most powerful lever for addressing persistent gaps in equity and access.

Even before the pandemic, [research](#) suggested that traditional scheduling, which sorts students into six 50-minute periods a day, was used in 63 percent of American schools. That system hampered the flexibility needed to provide remediation for English-language learners and special education students. In the wake of educational losses caused by the pandemic, a traditional schedule will make it even more difficult for students who have fallen behind to retake classes or receive additional support.

But, when done strategically, scheduling can also place them in the most appropriate courses with the most experienced and effective teachers, and give them the most constructive support.

There are myriad reasons why districts and schools will be challenged, now more than ever, to rethink their approach to scheduling. Students will return to school from wildly different experiences with remote learning. Addressing widening differences is a challenge that does not fit neatly into 50-minute segments. Students taking advanced STEM and foreign language courses, for example, might benefit from

increased instruction in those subjects. Or, conversely, students struggling with writing might show improvements after longer English composition classes.

The challenge of differentiating instruction in ways that respond to the needs of all learners is compounded by the fact that 74 percent of classes last for less than an hour, according to [research](#) from the “Unlocking Time” project funded by The Gates Foundation.

What if we considered switching to trimester terms, which create more opportunities for changes to schedules and courses, and offer more time for additional support classes for students who need to “catch up” after an extended period of distance learning?

Collaboration, which teachers say is a core element of their work, also suffers under traditional schedules, particularly in this teach-from-home era. Sharing their experiences with one another enriches their understanding of how their students learn and what they need to succeed. But according to “Unlocking Time,” most teachers had little time for such collaboration even before the complications of adapting their curricula for online learning, spending fewer than five hours collaborating with peers each week.

What if for the 2020-21 school year, we adapted our schedule to place ninth-graders in electives while, at the same time, giving ninth-grade teachers a common free period for collaboration? The increased time for collaboration would benefit both students and teachers—whether their classrooms are physical or virtual.

Such shifts will also begin to remedy the greatest casualty of common master scheduling processes: equity. Schedules have a tremendous impact on access to courses and teachers. Data across local, state and national systems reveal that we need to devote more time to our most vulnerable subgroups: English learners, students with disabilities and other at-risk populations. Our schedules don't reflect that. The most rigorous courses—such as Advanced Placement, Honors and International

Baccalaureate classes—generally are taught by the most experienced teachers and have the lowest class sizes.

What if we gave English learners the most experienced teachers and the smallest class sizes? What if we opened extra sections for students who need additional support to pass math, science and other core courses? What if we eliminated prerequisites to College, Career and Technical Education courses (CCTEs)? One high-performing school recently listed Integrated Math 1 as a prerequisite to an engineering course, which means that only advanced ninth-graders can enroll. Imagine that: denying access to an engaging CCTE class because the student didn't take Integrated Math I.

Additionally, the post-COVID-19 world provides an excellent opportunity for districts to perform “equity audits” on their transcripts, which will reveal everything from academic performance to course access. The results, particularly the learning paths of non-graduates, will provide important feedback on how schools can correct inequities and boost graduation rates.

The more intentional we become about structuring and using time, the more we empower students to get access to the learning they need when they need it.

Much of how schools operate—from teacher assignments to course offerings and bell schedules—already is in flux due to the pandemic. The fluid reality of “learn from home” offers an opportunity for schools and districts to experiment with changes to the traditional schedules, whether those changes are small (creating the common collaboration period) or more complex (switching to trimesters).

It's time for school and district leaders to use the schedule as a lever for access—and an enabler of equity.

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