

Marshall Memo 586

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
May 11, 2015

Effective Use of Time in Classrooms and Professional Development

In this *District Management Journal* article, Nathan Levenson and Daniel Goldberg say that most schools and districts don't manage *time* nearly as carefully as dollars and cents. This is odd since 70-80 percent of K-12 resources are devoted to paying staff for their time. "Even more important than the financial implications of unmanaged time are the implications about student learning," say Levenson and Goldberg. "From academic growth to arts enrichment to social-emotional learning, nearly all of the things that we value most require time. For adults too, professional growth and continuous learning require not only large investments of time, but thoughtful and expert use of that time... In today's environment of higher standards, dwindling budgets, and increasing state and federal mandates, careful management of an organization's time is an opportunity too important to overlook."

Since the 1960s, many American schools have committed huge sums to increasing the length of the school day and improving the student-teacher ratio – but academic results compared to other countries are unimpressive and racial-economic achievement gaps within the U.S. have persisted. Levenson and Goldberg believe this is because we haven't addressed how time is *used*, and that's because of three factors:

- **A culture of teacher autonomy** – There's great latitude in many schools on how classroom time is spent, which has benefits (personalization of instruction, attracting professionals who appreciate professional discretion) but can also result in inefficient and ineffective practices in some classrooms.
- **Difficulty gathering data** – It's hard to get detailed information on how teachers, counselors, and administrators spend their time.
- **Unsophisticated scheduling** – In many schools, programming is done by amateurs, resulting in inefficiencies and poor use of human resources.

Adding time to the school day and year doesn't address these issues, say Levenson and Goldberg: "To maximize the benefits of staff and student time, districts need to carefully

consider both the quantity of time available and how that time is spent.” Their bottom line for the effective use of time:

- It ensures that each student is able to master rigorous material.
- Teachers and other educators work collaboratively and develop expertise in their crafts.

Here is Levenson’s and Goldberg’s three-part framework for optimizing the use of time in schools:

• **Audience** – Grouping students by specific academic criteria. For example, a Massachusetts fifth-grade math team began giving a common assessment every two weeks; they met to analyze the data using a sticky note for each student and formed four reshuffled groups based on students’ needs: 35 students who were highly proficient worked on enrichment; 25 students struggling with place value worked with the teacher strongest in that area; 18 students struggling with fractions were with the teacher strongest at fractions; and 22 students who basically understood the chapter worked with a second-year teacher on extensions. The results were dramatic: within one year, the school’s fifth-grade proficiency on the state test went from 38 to 68 percent.

• **How the time is used: Activity, amount of time, and actors** – First, what is the activity? (for example, dividing the elementary literacy block into phonics, word work, small-group work, and independent reading); second, what is the amount of time? (for example, 15 minutes for phonics and word work, 45 minutes for small-group work, and 30 minutes for independent reading); and third, who is the actor? (for example, reading is taught by the classroom teacher, assisted during small-group time by a highly skilled reading teacher).

The actors are particularly important when planning teachers’ professional development. When grade-level or subject-area teacher teams meet to look at their students’ interim assessment results, they need real expertise in the room to make the best use of data-analysis time. What happens, ask Levenson and Goldberg, when, “of the few teachers assembled in one room, *none* is a highly effective teacher? It is unclear how, by working together, these teachers will ever become highly effective. By not carefully matching the ‘audience’ and the ‘actor,’ this school has squandered valuable planning time on activities that are likely to have no effect on professional growth or student learning. With teachers, as with students, *who* provides or leads teacher improvement efforts is key to effectiveness.”

• **Monitoring and continuously adjusting** – Although many teachers are good at the first two areas above, some are not, and principals and district leaders struggle to supervise how classroom time is used. In the past, elementary teachers have received very little guidance on how they spend their time (aside from entry, lunch, recess, electives, and dismissal). Recently many districts have tightened this up, often requiring 90 minutes for literacy and 60 minutes for math and even specifying when in the day these instructional blocks should take

place (usually morning for literacy). The next level is getting even more specific – for example, requiring elementary teachers to spend x minutes on comprehension or secondary social studies teachers to allocate time for note-taking and debate and Spanish teachers on speaking and writing.

“The point here is not that there is necessarily a right answer,” say Levenson and Goldberg, “but that these data points raise a question: how should teachers and administrators manage the ‘Three As’ of activity, amount, and actor? Tracking this data along with student outcomes will provide valuable information as to what works best, and will allow for more-rapid scaling up of successful practices.” One district gathered data on phonics instruction in kindergarten and first grade and found that some teachers were spending well over the recommended 100 minutes a week, cutting into other important activities, while others were teaching as little as 40 minutes. There were also significant variations in the quality of instruction. The data were very helpful in improving the delivery of instruction for all students.

Is extending the school day or year necessary? These questions should be answered first, perhaps leading to the conclusion that additional time isn’t necessary:

- What is the goal? e.g., providing high-quality literacy instruction for all students.
- What is our approach? e.g., extending the core literacy block and providing intervention periods.
- How much time is required? e.g., 60 minutes per day
- Is there any time in the day that can be repurposed? e.g., extra-long lunch period, free periods, extra time in homeroom, PD days, time devoted to similar or related activities.

Is it possible to find more time for professional development without additional spending?
Some key questions:

- Do you focus faculty meetings and other recurring meetings on improving teaching and learning?
- Do you use data on teachers’ strengths and areas of opportunity to customize PD?
- Do you use scheduling experts to help program the school?
- Do you ensure that all teacher planning groups include at least one highly-effective teacher?
- Do your schools create and monitor schedules both for the building overall and for individual coaches/experts?
- Have you developed guidelines for how coaches and other experts should spend their time with teachers?

Finally, Levenson and Goldberg list ten mistakes to avoid:

- Don't assign scheduling to a non-expert. This is a complex and tremendously important task and should be done only by someone with experience and expertise.
- Don't assume time is being spent as planned. Perception rarely matches reality. Detailed study is needed to see what's really going on.
- Don't settle for the data you have. New methods are needed to gather data, including short, automated staff surveys.
- Don't forget to manage all the time in the district. This includes faculty meetings, PLC time, data team meetings, and other blocks of time.
- Don't hesitate to develop guidelines. These don't need to be rigid, but parameters are helpful.
- Don't spread time too thin. Quality, not quantity.
- Don't do it by hand. Computers can crunch data more efficiently than pen and paper.
- Don't add more time without repurposing existing time first. Many meetings are not as productive as they can be and can be tweaked for great impact.
- Don't forget to monitor continuously. Checking in on classrooms and meetings is vital.
- Don't overlook the importance of quality instruction. "Simply adding more ineffective time is not likely to result in improved outcomes," say the authors. Effective teaching is the single most-important factor in student achievement.

"Managing Time: Your Scarcest Resource" by Nathan Levenson and Daniel Goldberg in *The District Management Journal*, Spring 2015 (Vol. 17, p. 12-22),

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