

Essential Scheduling Practices for High-Performing Schools with Career Academies/SLCs

By Mike Neubig

The existence of the achievement gap and the number of disengaged students in today's high schools have alerted education professionals that traditional models of scheduling are falling short in meeting student needs. Upon entering ninth grade, students are often placed in courses that are not always best suited for their ability or learning style and are forced to stay in courses after they experience repeated failure or are ready to move forward.

The traditional system is inflexible and designed to "shoot for the middle" and be satisfied with whatever is hit (*Breaking Ranks II*, 2004). The result is that learning is disconnected and fragmented, and little student support is offered outside the regular classroom setting.

Yet research has shown that there are essential scheduling practices for high-performing schools that have been able to implement innovative "nontraditional" schedules. What these have in common is the focus on personalized learning environments for students. Personalized learning can mean career academies/smaller learning communities (SLCs), in which large comprehensive high schools are made into schools within a school. They might also consist of adviser/advisee programs and other structures designed to keep students from slipping through the cracks. Through the implementation process, high-performing schools that focus on personalized learning experiences for students realize that the traditional high school schedule too often gets in the way of positive teaching practices

that can have an impact on student learning.

By implementing personalized learning programs that research has proven to be essential to high-performing schools, schools are attempting to design structures more suited to meet all student needs. Schools that are able to sustain these structures overcome much resistance common to the change process. What is critical to their success is the ability to design the school day to support the personalized programs, as well as the ability to develop new scheduling priorities.

Paradigm Shift

Programmatic changes such as career academies/SLCs, academic teams, adviser/advisee programs and so forth need a new structure in which to occur in the school day. Challenges arise because the programs are often only for specific student populations. Despite school-wide efforts to shift the paradigm to more personalized programs, past scheduling difficulties still exist. The question of where to place music, elective, intervention, accelerated, remedial, AP and other "singleton" courses, makes implementing new programming difficult.

Traditionally, many schools have allowed teachers to decide where and when they will teach, whereas high-performing schools *schedule in ways best for the students*. This step is a paradigm shift, as the scheduling of personalized programs takes first priority in the master schedule. I describe this as beginning with a new end in mind.

Breaking Tradition

An important question for high schools in transition is often, "Who are we going to assign as teachers in the desired programs?"

A report from The Education Trust (2005) states that, "When making decisions about who teaches whom, high-impact schools consider factors such as past student performance and the teacher's area of study in assigning teachers to specific courses. In average-impact schools, teaching assignments are more likely to be determined by staff seniority and teacher preference."

Many times, schools place their well-crafted teachers with the AP and honors-level students and their new teachers with the freshmen or lower-level courses. Why? In the traditional high school scheduling model, teacher preference and/or seniority has driven the course assignments.

It has been viewed as a right of passage to earn the stereotypical honors students, therefore new teachers should be assigned the ninth graders or the "low" performing students. This does not necessarily place the students with the best teacher for the course, and it creates the perception that new teachers have to "work up" to teaching advanced students, and rigor is not an issue. High-performing schools may place an experienced teacher in the most difficult intervention or remedial courses, while having a new teacher, who may be well versed in the subject area, teach AP-level courses. Careful consideration of teacher and student placement provides a better atmosphere for learning.

Staffing Considerations

Teachers scheduled into career academies/SLCs need to be able to work from a perspective larger than their classrooms. The new ideals of learning communities and personalized programming require an attitude of cooperation and the additional focus on the environment that the school setting creates for the student as a whole. Schools that have adviser/advisee programs, thematic-career or academic teams need to include staff members with specific skill sets. The ideal staff members will have the desire to integrate curriculum and be willing to work with others within the flexible schedule.

Much can be written on team dynamics and common traits of interaction, but teacher selection for the scheduling of personalized programs is an important step to success. High-performing schools promote self-selecting team members. The action of personal choice is powerful and provides ownership of programming that may not otherwise exist. Teachers who have internalized the goals of the personalized programs and who are willing to forge against natural resistance to change are traditionally the highest functioning team members.

Early Warning Systems

Traditional school structures have proven to be limited in serving diverse populations. Therefore, personalized programs are developed with the intent of scheduling students in ways that better serve all student needs. In order to achieve this, students must have equal access to all courses available and be matched with instructional methods that best suit their learning styles and needs. High-performing schools place students in courses to meet their needs before they fail. This is often difficult to achieve at the onset of the school year due to imperfect school-to-school transition practices.

A report from The Education Trust (*Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground*, 2005) states that, “High-impact schools have early warning systems to help

catch students before they fail. Counselors at these high schools, for instance, analyze seventh- and eighth-grade test scores to identify struggling students. Students who are identified are assigned to a variety of supports.”

Research demonstrates that students’ first impressions of high school are lasting ones; proper course placement and immediate support go a long way to achieve that end and to achieve the optimal learning environment.

Support for Diverse Populations

Support for struggling students is also an important consideration when designing structures for personalized programs. One example of a support that is often used is that of “double dosing,” or providing students with deficiencies entering high school an extra class period of instruction. This seems to be most important in reading and/or math, the areas where the largest number of students are behind upon entering ninth grade.

According to The Education Trust (2005), “High-impact schools provide students who arrive at school behind their peers with extra instructional time in English and math in a way that keeps students on track with college-preparatory requirements.”

Successful schools understand the power of using resources in ways that make sense for students and teachers. For example, the students receiving the additional course in reading and/or math are placed with the same teacher who instructs them in the regular course. Career academies/SLCs keep students together as learning communities for additional periods when possible. Traditional study halls and sometimes elective courses are disbanded, and students are organized by learning community and provided access to their teachers for additional time. This practice makes use of the whole school day and provides students with extended learning opportunities that did not exist under the old system.

Structures for Success

Structures used by high-performing schools are ones that provide the support described above, but also empower teachers to make instructional and student-placement decisions. This more readily occurs when teachers are assigned in a career academy/SLC and given a block of time in which to teach. The “block of time” is a different concept from the traditional instructional period, as teachers are now set free from predetermined course lengths and now share the whole with the other learning community teachers.

The learning community described can be made up of academic teams, thematically connected subjects, or part of a career or other type of academy. It is essential that the learning community be “pure” or consisting of common students who are not shared across other communities. This type of structure provides avenues for the teachers to gather student information, decide upon student placement, and cooperatively attend to all student needs.

The Power of the Flexible Block

The schedule most suited to accomplishing the goals of the personalized programs is that of the flexible block. The flexible block is usually equal to the total amount of time allotted for the teamed courses with the addition of any other time that can be provided for extended learning purposes. In order to achieve fluency in the school day, the beginning and end of the block must coincide with the rest of the school schedule.

The instructional strategies and grouping of students is in the sole power of the autonomous SLC teachers. Educators are often locked in the mindset of how long each period is and are not used to the dynamic of being a part of a team and having a flexible block of time in which to instruct students. High-performing schools take advantage of all the flexible block has to offer.

The flexible block allows for a multitude of teaching strategies without interfering with the rest of the student

day, which puts teachers at an advantage when addressing student needs. It allows teachers to vary the lengths of periods in courses such as science or English, where extended lab times may be needed. It also provides extended time for integrated projects and provides the ability to challenge student thought processes through integrated projects and activities.

By having the flexible block schedule, teachers are provided the opportunity to schedule their own students and decide upon placement that best serves the students at any given time. Teachers can thus regroup students on a regular basis for a multitude of reasons such as integrated projects, interest-based mini-units, course-specific help sessions, field trips, distance-learning events, research projects and so forth. As part of the effectiveness of the flexible block, teachers must have planning time and be trained in order to organize student groupings,

design alternate schedules and plan appropriate curriculum.

What Can Be Learned?

It has been well documented that many schools have been less than successful when attempting to implement personalized programs (Payne, 2001). The high-performing schools that have succeeded in this quest have done so by creating sustainable environments of collaboration and ownership. In support of these environments are practices common to their implementation of new school structures.

What has proven to be essential are the appropriate assignment of learning community teachers, the creation of the flexible block, the scheduling of “pure” learning communities, the gathering of important student information used for placement, common planning time for team teachers, and consistent use of supporting resources. Those who desire

personalized learning programs, such as career academies, need to model these practices and recognize their value in creating and sustaining high-performing high schools. ■

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References

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