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It's Time to Look at Educator Time!

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Press, Anna and Bohanon, Hank. It's Time to Look at Educator Time!. American School Board Journal, 210, 2: , 2023. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, Education: School of Education Faculty Publications and Other Works,

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It's Time to Look at Educator Time!

March 17, 2023

Abstract

Despite the persistent feeling that time is a scarce resource in schools, there is a lack of research on time use for educators. Issues related to educators' time use have amplified since the pandemic's start. In this article, we propose how and why schools should develop time study protocols to support their students and staff effectively.

Introduction

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been considerable disruptions to the school day. Many PK-12 teachers adapted to the realities of teaching online. In some cases, educators navigated the challenges of operating hybrid classrooms. Beneath shifting policies and increasing expectations is the assumption that educators have the time to manage every task that comes their way. School administrators are then faced with implementing new reforms without overburdening already busy school staff. Despite this persistent feeling that time is in short supply, there is a lack of practical, local research on time use for educators. A better understanding of educator time allocations could facilitate school improvement implementation efforts, including increased collaboration between staff and tailored professional development opportunities.

Problem Context

Recent local, state, and federal educational policies across the U.S. include curriculum updates, removing books from libraries, changes to teaching standards, and increased parental involvement in instruction. Amid this recent flurry of pressures, school staff face a lack of consideration for their role in implementing interventions. Several questions remain for educators based on their experiences. These questions include: *How will these initiatives be implemented in the classroom? How will these new demands impact my work, given my current workload? Will any pre-existing obligations be removed?*

In addition to these questions, changes occur within a broader U.S. culture and legislative context driven by high-stakes, standardized testing, and accountability. Policymakers behind these efforts do not necessarily factor time into how educators implement their programs. In her seminal book, *Inside Teaching: How Classroom Life Undermines Reform* (published in 2005), Mary Kennedy shared that teachers in the U.S. have less planning and instructional time than teachers in other countries. Without time for adequate training, discussions among educators, and planning for restructuring, it is hard to imagine reforms leading to implementation as intended.

Based on my (Anna's) experience working as a senior policy advisor and a teacher, I do not doubt there can be a disconnect between top-down policies and local realities. As a new teacher, I remember being intimidated by the plethora of standards, curricula, and policies that loomed large over my classroom decision-making. As a policymaker in government, I tried to bring that practical lens to any work I reviewed. Administrators and school staff, including educators, face the challenge of implementing a constant stream of new policies and programs without necessarily having the time and training to do so. When schools mandate reforms or offer professional development and coaching without granting educators the time to implement, it can lead to decreased buy-in, frustration, and failure of the initiatives.

Specific Challenge

It is not easy to know exactly what happens in classrooms. Educators balance students', parents', and administrators' needs while exercising professional judgment. As more bills centered on "educator transparency" are proposed or passed, there is increased scrutiny about how time in schools is spent. We are not aware of a national database in the U.S. or Canada to track educator time use or how schools use time to monitor reform efforts. The one related compendium is the international Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), organized by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This organization compiles aggregate data around teacher instructional time to compare specific questions country by country. We are not suggesting that a national monitoring system would be helpful. Instead, we recommend a local approach that centers on schools tracking their staff's efforts to help free up more time for them to collaborate and partake in professional learning opportunities.

Some readers may wonder why we would suggest monitoring educator time and whether collecting those data could lead to reprisals or negative impacts on educators. Monitoring educator time for punitive purposes is not our intended aim. Also, we do not think a one-size-fits-all approach is a solution to the problem of lack of time. Instead, we suggest localized equity-oriented time studies within schools to help free up educator time for more collaborative purposes such as ongoing professional learning and development with their colleagues. By considering how time is spent, administrators have the potential to change a school's culture around instruction and educator workflow when implementing schoolwide reform efforts.

What Educators Say

If you are a PK-12 educator, consider what you are asked to do during a given school day. What might you think if you had to break down those activities into categories? Some researchers have proposed time-based categories such as academic and nonacademic instruction (Vannest & Parker, 2010), planning (Vannest & Hagan-Burke, 2010), and collaboration (Pas et al., 2020). And if you had to weigh how much time you spend doing work within each category, which would be the weightiest? Which category would be the lightest? And how would you want to reallocate your time? It is quite likely that you feel overworked and under-supported, not given sufficient time to collaborate with your peers, or not provided with training on the initiatives you are being asked to implement. Even when you have "release time" to collaborate with

your colleagues, it may be too little and too focused on testing and assessment. If so, you are not alone. Jennifer Davis, co-founder of the National Center on Time & Learning, has been a vocal advocate for the need for educators to receive adequate time in their instructional days to collaborate. She and her colleagues suggest that time is a critical factor for educators.

The issue of time may have arisen in daily conversations with fellow educators. You may have heard, “*I just don’t have enough time,*” or “*I’m just not sure how they can ask me to do this on top of everything else I’m already doing.*” Based on their longitudinal research of teacher time and affect before and during the pandemic, Nathan Jones and colleagues (2021) reported educators needing more time for collaborative opportunities. These opportunities involved restructuring their workdays to facilitate collaboration.

Also, educators and other professionals working on schoolwide reform efforts are generally not given sufficient time to collaborate or engage with available coaching and professional learning opportunities. This lack of time becomes more apparent when educators face federal or state changes to standards, such as the introduction of the Common Core. To that end, Joellen Killian penned a valuable report in 2013, *Establishing Time for Professional Learning*, describing how some districts across the U.S. responded effectively to reforms related to the Common Core. For example, some districts responded by listening to educators’ concerns, conducting time studies in their schools, and making changes to better support educators and students.

Detailed Solution

Throughout the pandemic, we have seen more people recognize the political nature of education. Some people may advocate for new guidelines on how educators navigate classroom time in a post-pandemic world. The solutions sometimes vary, but there seems to be a shared understanding that we must move toward a “new normal.” In educator speak, we can use the pandemic as a *teachable moment*. We argue that in recommending any reforms, we must consider building time and space within the educational setting to foster collaborative learning and relationships among school staff.

Our solution? Pay more attention to educator time by collecting data and then putting that data to use. Discussions based on these data can lead to reallocating time to account for collaborative work, coaching, and professional learning. Administrators should not mandate schoolwide reforms without first understanding how educators will afford the time to implement them. Collectively, educators can propose solutions such as negotiated collective agreement provisions around time for preparation and instruction. You can look to “expanded time schools” as implemented in certain districts in Massachusetts (Davis, 2015) as an example of using time as an alterable variable. A common point of agreement among reformers is teachers’ need for dedicated time for collaboration and professional development.

Strategies for Local Time Studies

After reading this article, you may think, “Obviously, there’s never enough time in the day to get everything done!” You may also believe that documenting educator time within a school is another massive time ask itself! Where would you even start? We suggest that the first step is getting schoolwide buy-in.

Administrators who want to conduct a time study within the school need educator support, and vice versa. As John Kotter (1995) explained in *Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail*, administrators and staff need to generate urgency around understanding educators’ time allocations. Specifically, have conversations with staff about their current expectations based on their job descriptions. Next, talk with them about additional tasks that have been added as a result of reform efforts or other improvement ideas. Based on these discussions, school leadership can work with an existing team or create a new one to select a protocol for studying staff time allocations. The team can then develop clear expectations and roles to help minimize any fear of the data being used for punitive purposes. Depending on each local context, involving stakeholders such as union representatives, administrators, and educational experts may be appropriate. Additionally, teams can address data collection and analysis concerns to change the instructional day or school culture.

We have outlined seven steps from Joellen Killion’s 2013 report to support your efforts. Again, this process focused on school boards conducting local time studies. We hope that elements of this process may be helpful as you reflect on what may apply to your setting.

Step 1: Form your team (or connect with an existing team) to plan and run the time study. The report by Joellen Killion includes an assessment to guide your team member selection and the timeline for reporting the data.

Step 2: Examine organizational and individual assumptions about time use in your setting. The report includes tools such as surveys and focus group protocols for soliciting staff’s thoughts and feelings about their use of time.

Step 3: Gather data to understand existing time use. The document provides time logs that various school community members could use for data collection.

Step 4: Review data, generate options, and summarize lessons learned to create a sense of urgency for change in your school. You will find tools in the report to encourage considering what other districts have done while reviewing the results of your local time study.

Step 5: Encourage the time study team to collaborate with other stakeholders based on the data. The document includes resources for refining and deciding which recommendations to address, such as amending the school schedule and changing hiring practices.

Step 6: Develop an implementation plan to carry out the recommended changes to time allocations for staff. The report has resources to help teams consider how the agreed-upon recommendations can be implemented in the school setting.

Step 7: Conduct an ongoing review of the data. The document includes guides to facilitate deep, ongoing reflection about the use of staff time.

The ability of the school staff to more effectively implement their reform priorities and educators' sense of efficacy with the interventions should help determine the success of the time study process.

Conclusion

Our view is that it is difficult for schools to know how to support their staff's implementation of reform efforts without reviewing how educators spend their time. Therefore, applying time studies may help school leaders make the most of their coaching and professional learning opportunities. We believe creating protocols for educators to reflect on their time while participating in reform efforts is vital. It is time to look at time.

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