

CURRICULUM-DRIVEN SCHEDULING

URBAN ACADEMY HIGH SCHOOL

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School schedules: An Overview

Of all its documents, a high school's schedule is perhaps the most instructive. Apart from telling students and teachers what meets when and what's on offer any given period, the schedule is also a window to the school's instructional perspective. It reveals much about its values as what it makes time for and what it doesn't, alongside the range and level of courses offered its students. Most schools' schedule is a straight forward document detailing the course titles and time slots, which reoccur almost daily during the term. The document seems so straight forward that even seasoned observers sometimes ignore the obvious: the scheduled time slots create a dynamic between staff, students and curriculum and determine fundamentally the unfolding of a school's educational mission.

Traditionally, most high schools create their defining structure by dividing the day into seven 42 minute periods with course titles dropped into time slots: math, history, English, health ed, lunch, gym, art. Each receives its time slot and, except for the obligatory double period twice a week for science labs, the slots appear to be interchangeable. In most schools, the task of creating the master plan, then filling in the student program card, is assigned to resident computer 'techie' who assume that efficiency is the goal (the long lines of students usually camped outside the program office seeking changes, notwithstanding) and are charged with presenting students with a computer printout on the first day of term, thereby eliminating any loss of instructional time. Teacher contracts routinely recognize this reciprocity between time slots and teacher work load. Thus, work schedules, in concert with notions of uniformity, often dictate the shape of teaching and learning within a school.

Block scheduling

Perhaps it was because of what many regarded as this lock-step approach to scheduling, that the overhaul of school schedules became one of the first targets of school reform in the 90's. Along with efforts aimed at restructuring large institutions into small units, block scheduling became a centerpiece in the effort to transform dysfunctional secondary schools. The idea was to eliminate 42 minute period and promote content connections by merging subjects such as English and history (humanities) and math and science into two hour blocks of time. Advocates argued that block scheduling would promote more active learning, better access to teachers and fewer scheduling conflicts. Apparently such arguments are quite persuasive: according to one study, some 23% of the nation's high schools are either totally or partially using block schedules, and publications and even web pages support the shift.

Nonetheless, despite its popularity, block scheduling isn't the only alternative way to organize time. In fact, some critics contend that predetermined time slots, whether long or short, place organizational efficiency above course planning and student engagement. They argue that merely substituting long blocks of time for shorter periods does not address fundamental issues of teaching and learning. Using 120 minutes well can be as formidable a task as cramming engaging lessons into 42 minute segments; it's what actually *happens* during the class, how one *uses* whatever time there is, that actually

matters. Thus tinkering with time allocations is seen to be of limited value unless it becomes an opportunity to rethink questions such as how time is used, whether

teaching strategies are appropriate, what is meant by ‘covering’ the curriculum, how much time should be devoted to teacher talk, to followup work by students, to small group work, to homework?

As with any reform, such questions are the critical. After all, it’s what gets cut loose from mindless tradition that ultimately matters and how the freedoms that are unleashed are actually used that is fundamental to meaningful change. What would be the point of changing structures if the effort didn’t produce improved student outcomes, or result in staff having more control over what goes on in the school?

Curriculum-driven scheduling:

Urban Academy, one of New York City’s alternative high schools, has developed a curriculum-driven schedule. Its weekly timetable reveals much about how the school functions and what it values. Indeed, the very act of creating the semester’s schedule is a defining activity for the school. Towards the end of each semester -- in January and in June -- the staff reviews the previous term’s work. Both courses and the schedule are assessed through the lens of student achievement. Were there noticeable gaps, not enough time for revision support work, too few ‘lab’ classes to support the specific academic needs of students, not enough opportunities for field trips? Did teachers have time to do what they planned? Did the time of day particular classes were offered (e.g. first period, last period) matter? In short, did the structure created work as intended? Did we get what we wanted? As these two examples show, no two semesters at urban Academy look exactly alike.

Creating variable time slots:

The review of the previous term flows directly into the process of constructing the schedule for the coming semester. At Urban Academy, time slots flow from curricular needs, with the demands of specific course goals actually driving the allocated time segments. At first, teachers propose specific courses they plan to teach along with requests for the amount of time they wish to have available for each class session over the course of a week.

Classes range from nearly an hour to two and three quarter hours in length. Some meet three times a week (A period), some twice (F period) and others once (J period). Some meet for two short (55 minutes) and one medium long periods (an hour and a quarter). Classes do not meet everyday, nor does each course necessarily meet for the same amount of time each class period; courses may, for example, meet an hour on Tuesday and two and a half hours on Friday.

In requesting particular configurations, there are a number of important teaching considerations: time slots are requested according to the specific needs of a given course, the teaching style employed, and an individual faculty member's professional responsibilities.** For example, one may intend to teach a course in which weekly field trips or extended research periods are integral to the structure of the class. In that case, one would request a short, (55 minutes) short, long (150 minutes) configuration. A studio course might meet for an entire two and a half hour bloc in the photo lab once a week, and for a one 55 minute session used for critiquing work, twice a week. A course such as the *History of the Civil Rights Movement* which makes frequent use of outside speakers would require extended time periods to allow time for both a presentation and an indepth followup discussion.

Teachers offering courses with heavy writing demands often request a 105 minute slot twice a week with a 55 minute lab for additional support work. Faculty members responsible for supervising the Urban Academy's college transition program require time to travel from school to college sites. Some teachers request lab periods to provide support work for classwork; others do not. Some classes meet three times a week; others twice. Knowing that many of our students would benefit from assistance to complete assignments means that occasional homework labs are scheduled into the school day.*** Thus, what drives the schedule, overall, is the assumption that time can be manipulated to accomplish specific curricular goals.

Creating the schedule: the process

As staff members indicate their time preferences, one individual takes notes, keeping track of all the variables requested: the number of class meetings per week, the length of each class and, on occasion, even the preferred time of day. Following this initial discussion, draft one is created. There are a few givens: there is a weekly time slot devoted to an all-school meeting and one entire afternoon (usually Wednesdays) scheduled

for community service when students leave the school to serve as interns in one of the cooperating nonprofit agencies. (This is also the time of the school's weekly staff meeting.) There are also two ten minute 'breaks' during the day: one in the middle of the morning, one in the afternoon and an hour lunch period. Beyond that, the use of the school gym requires coordination with a building-wide schedule. Since Urban Academy is located within a large Complex, it shares the use of certain common facilities with several other schools; thus, some constraints exist related to space availability. Finally, since Urban Academy has an extensive mentoring program for teaching interns, scheduling must be sensitive to the need for senior staff and interns to share certain periods in common.

To some degree, the curriculum also dictates what time of day a particular class may be offered. A course utilizing museums, libraries or field trips to selected institutions would be scheduled for late mornings or afternoons to insure entry. And particular classes might be scheduled immediately before or after lunch in order to increase travel time available to and from galleries or field sites. Community service is scheduled in an afternoon so students do not have to return to school from city-wide locations.

Creating the schedule: revision

Once a first draft of the schedule is prepared and distributed, a revision process begins in which the entire staff scrutinizes both individual schedules and the overall plan. During this process, discussion may focus on the number of lab sessions offered, or what courses run opposite others or the amount of time and positioning of courses offered for the first time. Routinely some previously offered courses are replaced by new courses and these often become topics for a wide-ranging discussion relating to course content and teacher expectations. Similarly, the amount of time requested for classes in which field work (museums, research libraries, photo documentation) is an integral part, would be periodically reviewed with respect to how other classes might also make use of NYC's resources. Revisions continue to be made until all observable glitches are corrected, usually accomplished by the seventh or eighth draft.

There are some decisions that are left to work out on an ad hoc basis once the term is underway that are not reflected in the official schedule. There are for example, occasional "triples" in which one class is extended over three time slots in order to permit trips or special projects. The staff might decide to "A" and "B" period classes meet for an entire

morning on alternate weeks. Similarly, research days also periodically appear in the unofficial schedule. These too are planned when members of staff determine a need. Research days are intended to give students a chance to work individually with teachers, visit a library, conduct interviews, and, in general, get on top of work they need to complete,

Initially scheduled for an entire school day, research days became half days, as the staff concluded that students would use their time more productively if less rather than more time was scheduled. Research days require students to register for conferences or specific activities.

A final consideration by each staff member focusing on his or her own schedule and a walk through by a few students helps insure that teachers have adequate prep periods and that students have enough latitude in the course selection to allow for meaningful choice.

Teacher's schedule: *

*This teacher provides supervision for the school's College Transition program and travels to a local city college to provide support for participating students.

Student Schedule (a junior)

As time-consuming and cumbersome as it may seem, this approach to schedule-building, is regarded by the staff as one of the defining aspects of the school; the process establishes a school-based approach to professional development and forces teachers to think about what they want to accomplish in each course and how they are going to use the time to do it. A sense that the schedule can always be improved upon implies a different way of thinking about time and its connection to curriculum. Urban Academy's process, one that is particularly suited for smaller schools, helps insure a culture of ongoing review and change. Creating a new schedule each term is antithetical to a formula approach in which a structure, once created, gets recycled term after term.

Endnotes:

*Like most secondary schools, Urban Academy's staff is composed of teachers licensed in the various curricular areas. Thus, the courses, though individually designed by teachers and built on particular areas of professional expertise do provide the required spread of disciplines. Each semester's schedule is reviewed to insure that sufficient choices within disciplines are provided for.

** Registration is done on an individual basis with the help of a faculty member. The student's previous school performance is considered along with a review of the student's progress towards graduation.

***A catalog describing the courses and the teacher's expectations is distributed to students prior to registration. Guidance is provided during the registration process. To meet graduation requirements students must complete course work and proficiencies in six areas.