

The Schedule Won't Let Us

BY RICK AND BECKY DUFOUR



The most effective school systems in the world ensure that all of their schools have a process in place to monitor each student's learning on an ongoing basis and a systematic plan of intervention that provides a struggling student with additional time and support for learning (Barber & Mourshed, 2007). It certainly seems to make sense that any school claiming its mission is to help all students learn would have a plan for responding when some students don't.

One of the critical questions all schools must address when they begin the PLC at Work™ journey is *how will we respond when kids don't learn?* Every school should have a plan that guarantees students who are struggling to learn an essential skill or concept will receive additional time and support for learning in a way that is timely, directive, and systematic. Furthermore, this assistance should not require the student to miss new direct instruction.

Most of the educators with whom we have worked do not dispute the premise that a school claiming its mission is to help all students learn should actually have a coordinated plan in place for responding when some students don't learn. Unfortunately, they go on to explain that "the schedule won't allow it." This explanation has the benefit of demonstrating our good intentions—"We would love to intervene when kids do not learn"—at the same time it absolves us of responsibility—"Alas, it is simply impossible given our schedule." Blame is assigned to an inanimate, abstract concept (the schedule), while people are exonerated for failure to act.

This position is puzzling, and we offer these questions to educators across North America:

- Did you mean it when you said the purpose of your school or district is to help *all* students learn? Was that a sincere declaration of intent and priority or politically correct hyperbole?
- Do you recognize that some students will require more time and support for their learning than others? I am unaware of any researcher who has concluded all students can learn if time and support are constants rather than variables in the learning process.
- Do you agree a school's schedule should reflect its purpose and priorities?
- Have you created a schedule that ensures you have access to all students who experience difficulty in order to provide them with additional time and support for learning?

When we pose these questions one at a time to educators, it is disheartening to hear them say, “Yes, we are committed to helping all students learn. Yes, we recognize some will need more time and support if they are to learn. Yes, a school’s schedule should reflect its purpose and priorities. But, no, we do not have a system of intervention in place because the schedule won’t let us.” A school’s schedule should be regarded as a tool to further priorities rather than an impediment to change. Our advice to educators is simple: your schedule is not a sacred document. If your current schedule does not allow you to provide students with something as essential to their academic success as extra time and support for learning, you should change it!

Hundreds of schools throughout the United States have purposefully set out to provide time for intervention. These schools rely on different schedules. For example, Adlai E. Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, IL, has eight 50-minute periods in its school day, with one of the periods reserved for lunch. Cinco Ranch High School in Katy, TX, offers a seven-period day, with 30 minutes for lunch. Three high schools in the Whittier Union High School District near Los Angeles, CA, have six periods that meet on Mondays, then alternate three periods on a block schedule Tuesday through Friday. Both Lakeridge Junior High School in Orem, UT, and Prairie Star Middle School in the Blue Valley School District, KS, operate a modified A/B block schedule, but their schedules are different in many ways. Jane Addams Junior High School in Schaumburg, IL, offers a nine-period day. Boones Mill Elementary School in Virginia and Highland Elementary School in Maryland have schedules unique to each school, but both of them set aside specific time for intervention at each grade level each day. Schedules can differ. Schedules should, however, (1) give school personnel access to students who are experienc-

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ing difficulty in their learning during the school day and (2) ensure students receive additional time and support for learning in ways that do not require them to miss new direct instruction.

In most schools, what happens when students experience difficulty in learning does not depend on the school they attend; it depends on the randomness of the teacher

to whom they are assigned. This is not the fault of teachers. If the school has no process for responding in a systematic and coordinated way, individual teachers must act by default. A major failure of educational leadership has been the failure to address the question, what will happen in our school when students do not learn?

It is time for educational leaders to address the enormous gap between what they proclaim is the mission of their school and their inattentiveness to establishing systematic processes to support that mission. It is time to acknowledge that if your school is not providing this level of support, it is not because the “schedule won’t let us.” It is because you have chosen not to address this critical question in the PLC at Work process.

For examples of school schedules that guarantee time for intervention, go to <http://www.allthingsplc.info/tools/print.php#22>.

For examples of model PLC at Work schools and districts, go to www.allthingsplc.info and click on Evidence of Effectiveness.

This article is adapted from Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap: Whatever It Takes (2010) by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Gayle Karhanek, Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

References

Barber, M., & Mourshed, M. (2007). How the world’s best-performing school systems come out on top. McKinsey & Company. Retrieved from http://www.mckinsey.com/app_media/reports/ss0/worlds_school_systems_final.pdf.

Richard DuFour, a public school educator for 34 years, consults with school districts, state departments, and professional organizations throughout North America on strategies for improving schools.

Becky DuFour has served as a teacher, school administrator, and central office coordinator. She consults with and works for professional organizations, school districts, universities, and state departments of education throughout North America.