

Break Down the Walls, Blow Up the Schedule

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At High Tech High we aspire to create *deeper learning* experiences of lasting value for our students, ones where students have the opportunity to contribute in meaningful and authentic ways to problems facing their local and global communities. Walking the halls of our schools, you might see students designing children's toys for an orphanage in Mexico, filming a documentary on gun violence, or interviewing Vietnam vets to capture and portray their stories for a public event. When we are at our best, students are engaged in work that matters, both to them and the world beyond school, and have multiple opportunities to critique and revise their work so that the final products are beautifully crafted and worth sharing.

Like any organization, we have much room for improvement. Still, visitors from all over the world, struck by our diverse students' engagement and ownership of the learning, want to know how we've done "it," and how they might do the same. As a founding director of one of our high schools, I like to focus on two pieces of advice: break down the walls, and blow up the schedule.

Break Down the Walls

When I first started teaching math and physics at High Tech High, I was inspired to hone my craft because I saw students in my colleagues' classrooms building underwater submarines and creating video games that modeled the laws of motion. Faculty met for an hour before school every day to tune project ideas, examine student work and share dilemmas in our practice. We were all trying to figure out what it meant to be project-based teachers and knew that we worked in an environment where it was safe to take risks and learn from our mistakes. I would have never grown in my

teaching nor would we have evolved as a school focused on deeper learning, if we were all trying to figure it out alone in our classrooms.

We also knew that for learning to be authentic, we needed to break down the four walls of our classrooms and connect students to the adult world of work. When my students invented and marketed new electronic products, my teaching partner and I had engineers visit our classroom and critique their work along the way. Later, students presented their final business plans to a panel of venture capitalists from the community. These authentic audiences from beyond the walls fostered students' engagement and drive to create beautiful work.

Blow Up the Schedule

Ted Sizer believed you could learn a lot about the values of a school by the way resources and time were allocated. In this vein, we knew from the beginning that the HTH schedule needed to reflect two of our core values: progressive pedagogy and social class integration.

While bringing professionals into the classroom was important, we also knew that we needed to push our students out. Our entire course schedule was designed in the 11th and 12th grades to create opportunities for our students to go out on internship or take college courses. Over time we learned that giving students substantial time to fully immerse themselves in the world of work--learning through apprenticeship alongside a trusted mentor--was, in short, transformative. In particular, internships and college classes brought first generation students from disadvantaged backgrounds closer to a world that opened up possibilities for their future. After working at a local lab on underwater robots, students had not only a better understanding of the interesting career opportunities available when you have a degree in computer science, but how intellectually rewarding it feels to tackle challenging problems alongside inspired colleagues.

We also wanted to avoid the obvious pitfalls of traditional schedules: students shuffling between eight teachers throughout the day at the ring of a bell while teachers tried to build relationships and personalize learning for 200+ students and prep for three or more classes. Instead, small teams of two to

three teachers shared the same students, taught more than one subject for longer blocks of time and backwards designed projects together blurring the notion of traditional "disciplines." When one of our students struggled because her father was in jail or his parents were going through a divorce, it was nearly impossible for the small team of teachers in our small school not to notice and intervene.

Finally, we were well aware that the form of the schedule had the power to undo the very purpose of the school--social class integration. Our blind zip-code lottery was designed to integrate students across socioeconomic backgrounds and we knew that offering various tracks, including honors and AP courses, would perpetuate predictable patterns and outcomes for our low-income and first generation students. Each design decision in a school comes with compromises, and we embraced the challenge of differentiating instruction in heterogeneous classrooms over the pernicious effect of in-school segregation. While some parents fear that their child will be less competitive than their neighbor's child taking six AP courses, we have found the opposite to be true. Students have the opportunity to explore fewer topics in depth, develop critical and creative thinking skills, and engage in authentic work, all of which historically has served them well in college admissions and beyond.

Break down the walls and blow up the schedule. Then build your program according to your values--and be ready to change the structure to suit your needs.