Master Schedules: Translating Values Into Practice

Software helps balance trade-offs impacting teachers and students
Christina Casillas | Principal Leadership Article • September 2018

Like so many schools around the country, Roosevelt International Middle School in San Diego is grappling with the complexity—and responsibility—of ensuring that each student has the opportunity to access the most rigorous academic coursework. Our school offers an International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program with a dual-language pathway. Nearly 70 percent of our students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, 14 percent are a part of our special education program, and nearly 65 percent are Hispanic.

We are dedicated to creating pathways to rigor for all learners because we know that closing achievement gaps has to start with closing opportunity gaps. The course schedule is how we translate our aspirations into practice. A school's schedule, after all, reflects far more than its instructional priorities.

At Roosevelt, we are building a student-centered master schedule with equity and opportunity at its core. It relies on technology to manage a multiplicity of considerations that marry student needs with organizational capacity. We want to ensure access not just to rigor, but to the academic interventions and supports that will enable students to succeed.

What does this look like in the classroom? We build strategic groupings around students who receive special education services or who are English-language learners (ELLs). We build balanced, heterogeneous classroom rosters of students with mixed ability levels, providing opportunities for students to learn from and with each other. And we build common planning time into the schedule, enabling teachers to collaborate and take advantage of professional learning communities.

It wasn't always like this.

Three years ago, I shifted my approach toward a student-centered master schedule. I worked to account for student needs and student grouping while largely developing the schedule "by hand." This process took me many months, including summertime, to plan. To ensure I had the

appropriate student information, I assembled an array of spreadsheets, files, folders, and reports. When I learned about master scheduling technology, I initially saw it as a time-saving tool: An administrator would press a button, and the computer would randomly assign students to a class. I was not interested in this kind of "time-saving" without intentionality.

More Than Just Saving Time

But, as it turns out, technological supports can be more than a tool for simply saving time. The right tool, I realized, could enable us to incorporate our school values and priorities into the master scheduling process. Scheduling software could allow us to better understand the trade-offs that directly impact teachers and students.

Importantly, the visibility and flexibility of the schedule enables us to accomplish something critical to closing the achievement gap: ensuring that all students have access to rigorous, high-level instruction. When schools have access to comprehensive data about student schedules, they can better see the ways students are being served—or underserved. By aggregating data from multiple sources, we can answer questions such as:

- Do our ELL and special education students have access to the same advanced courses, with the proper staffing and instructional support, as their peers?
- Is there ethnic and socioeconomic demographic parity in enrollment for our most advanced courses, or are we "tracking" low-income and minority students into less advanced courses?
- Are we providing students equal access to the schedules most aligned with their academic goals, or is our scheduling process driven by the needs of the most advanced students?

As a middle school, we are focused on preparing our students for the rigor and demands of high school and beyond. We want to make sure that students are successful if they choose to take AP, IB, and honors classes in high school. This isn't for the faint of heart, and it is not a process with a well-defined start and end point. Not only do we need to monitor for potential constraints, we need to keep in mind how we maintain overall school demographic heterogeneities in the courses.

Often, schools set out to create a schedule that maximizes opportunity, but that ultimately falls into the well-worn trap of "shadow tracking"—a phenomenon in which students become informally grouped together on a single academic track. The limitations of the schedule wind up sorting students into academic pathways that may not prepare them for high-level coursework and postsecondary success.

Impact of Prioritization

School leaders must intentionally examine the impact of this prioritization on the rest of the staffing, rosters, and section placements. Otherwise, the result may be a schedule in which honors and nonhonors students do not interact during the school day, in which the course requests of nonhonors students are less likely to be fulfilled, or in which students are likely to be enrolled either entirely in honors or entirely in nonhonors courses.

In many cases, a school may commit to designing a master schedule that ensures students who take multiple honors courses can also enroll in elective classes. Oftentimes, this academic sorting falls along ethnic and socioeconomic lines, exacerbating social segregation as well as opportunity and achievement gaps. At Roosevelt, we offer some art and music electives as an extra class period beyond the typical school day, allowing more students to take advantage of these programs. Only a schedule built with an active eye toward maximizing choice and diversity can avoid these traps.

The platform we have been using at Roosevelt, called Abl Master Scheduler, provides us with an opportunity to carefully identify which classes and which sections specific students should be grouped in, and to balance classes based on student needs and staffing resources.

For example, we group students identified with special education needs per their individualized education programs and work to maintain a roster of about 20 percent of such students per classroom. Additionally, we build rosters in which 25 percent of the class is Gifted and Talented Education (GATE)-identified or high achieving, and 30 percent consists of ELLs. In this way, the scheduling technology not only allows us to balance our classrooms, but it also ensures that each classroom remains diverse enough so that students can learn from each other, and with each other.

Engaging the Entire Team

Early on, I knew this process would require input and insights from our entire team: teacher leaders from every department, counselors, IB coordinator, and administrative staff. I asked them all to consider the same set of questions. Are we providing an experience aligned with our vision for all of our students, or just some of our students? Looking at our master schedule in its current form, as well as our student achievement data, is our master schedule truly structured to maximize learning opportunities for all students, and is it responsive to student needs? What can we do differently? These questions have remained our guiding inquiries throughout this process.

My team had—and continues to have—many great ideas not only about how to use the schedule to better educate our students, but also about the importance of strategic staffing and balanced teaching assignments. It was vital to intentionally build preparation time into the schedule for teachers to collaborate; this allows them to focus on sharing instructional strategies, monitor student learning, and design lessons together.

At the high school level, students have far greater opportunities to exert agency over their schedules. But, in the middle school context, the schedule is even more important. The problem is that the schedule is a jigsaw puzzle, and it is a Herculean task for administrators to get every piece to fit perfectly. It is a task worth undertaking, however.

When you build a master schedule around student needs, the schedule itself becomes a learning tool, providing all students with the opportunity for success—and helping students better prepare for high school and beyond.

Christina Casillas is the principal of Roosevelt International Middle School in San Diego.

Sidebar: Making It Work

Utilize these top tips for optimizing master schedules:

- **Engage** teachers and the leadership team representing all content areas in gathering input, reflecting on the current master schedule, and reviewing student data. Share the process of developing a student-centered master schedule grounded in equity and access.
- **Examine** student needs through a data-informed approach. Leverage a variety of data sources, including academic performance, course requests, and special programs (special education, GATE, ELL) to get a complete picture of student needs, the composition of class rosters, and course offerings.
- **Ensure** you remain focused on your priorities and overall school vision. All decisions must be made with student needs at the core. The master schedule process is about organizing and coordinating your resources to enhance learning and promote academic excellence for all students. These important decisions must be guided by our key values as schools and educational leaders.

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