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What Does Your School Schedule Say About Equity? More Than You Think.

By [Adam Pisoni](#) and [Diane Conti](#)

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In Fall 2017, when Hoover High School in San Diego’s Unified School District began building the next year’s master schedule, school leaders discovered something concerning. Some of the students who needed extra support—English learners, special-education students, and others in need of academic interventions—were more likely to be scheduled in larger classes with less experienced teachers. They were also significantly underrepresented in Advanced Placement courses, and were often separated from other students throughout the day because of how their intervention blocks were scheduled.

This problem is not unique to Hoover. A [growing body of research](#) shows that outcomes for students diverge not just within districts, but within individual classrooms and schools. Improvements to pedagogical practices are critical, but insufficient, when students have unequal access to [rigorous courses](#), [academic programs](#), and [experienced teachers](#).

To systematically address these inequities, decision-makers must understand the processes that create them. Increased funding alone will not address endemic achievement gaps, because equity is more than just a fiscal or pedagogical challenge; it is also an operational one.

A school’s schedule determines how its core resources—time, personnel, even physical spaces—are allocated throughout the day. It dictates fundamental elements of the student experience: the teachers and peers they interact with throughout the day, the size and composition of their classes, their access to additional supports and services, and whether or not they take courses and electives aligned with their interests, graduation or college entry requirements.

Operational decisions also shape the course load for teachers, and whether they have scheduled time for collaboration, planning and professional support to deliver high-quality instruction for their students. These formative decisions are made by guidance counselors, assistant principals, principals, and superintendents before students ever enter the classroom.

Designing the student experience is no easy task. Schools are incredibly complex organizations, and only grow more complicated as they adapt to shifting demographics and expectations. The complexity of allocating scarce resources within schools is compounded by a maze of local, state, and federal requirements. The “alphabet soup” of programs, services, and strategies—CTE, IEPs, IB, ELL, GT, PBL—reflects a gradual shift toward a more personalized approach.

Against that backdrop, a school leader’s ability to make equity-informed decisions has, historically, presented a Rubik’s Cube-like challenge. School leaders are almost always aware that scheduling practices can have unintended consequences on equity, and student outcomes. But most haven’t had the tools to map assumptions to data and operationalize necessary changes. In many schools, these important decisions are still made using magnet boards and other processes with limited capacity.

The proliferation of student information and learning management systems means that the data that districts need to understand, and perhaps re-think, the allocation of resources is no longer trapped in file cabinets and magnet boards. Evaluating the implications of schedule or operational changes—and making the changes themselves—has gone from aspirational to feasible. With the right tools and data, districts can rethink school operations from a data-informed, equity-focused lens.

This was the case at Hoover, where Diane works as vice principal. She and her staff came together and decided the scheduling process had to change. Examining the data together, teachers became aware of the unintentional consequences of the previous schedules and why changes were being made.

Hoover pursued a data-driven approach that allowed for more balanced class sizes and ensured newer teachers were not overloaded with large classes of high-need students. Rosters became more diverse. Students with special needs and English language learners now learn alongside students in gifted programs who would traditionally be separated during the day. Importantly, the schedule guaranteed common preparation and planning time so teachers can meet and discuss the best ways to support all pupils.

Changes did not happen overnight. Hoover involved the school’s academy directors, teachers, and families in a robust process of schedule redesign—and recognized that real transformation requires a mindset and culture shift.

Implicit bias training and cultural awareness training helped equip staff to consistently hold high expectations for all students, and to shift any discourse from placing blame for poor outcomes to instead committing to improving those outcomes. Students and families were included in events to learn about the new academic programs, and they participated in a process of structured choice for new courses and electives to boost both rigor and engagement.

It’s time to embrace not only the potential, but the essential role of operations in furthering the pursuit of educational equity. When overlooked or underestimated, school-level processes can inhibit access to rigorous, high-quality teaching and learning. But when harnessed correctly with equity at the core, school operations have the power to improve every student’s experience—and to catalyze all other efforts to enhance pedagogy, rigor, and engagement.

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