

Small Interruptions. Big Consequences.

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As schools, our primary focus is to educate our students. Plain and simple. Yes, feeding students, relationship building, leadership training, STEAM classes and projects, sports, choir, band, National Honors Society, International Club, JROTC, CTE classes, EPSOs (early post-secondary opportunities), and all the other things we do in schools that are imperative for the development of our students and addressing their needs and interests. However, simply put, our role as schools and educators is to educate our students.

Daily teachers face obstacles that are disruptive to teaching and learning. The most common include: all call announcements, phone calls to classrooms, changes to the daily schedule to accommodate non-academic activities, lunch schedule taking precedence over class schedules, technology and internet outages, visits from administration and other faculty and staff, maintenance to the school building, maintenance to hardware and software completed during the school day, are just a few (Kraft & Monti-Nussbaum, 2021).

The list above is incomplete at best and only reflects disruptions outside of the teacher's control. Hypothetically speaking, even if our teachers were all are highly trained, high performing, and student focused, the education of students is regularly disrupted, because of the way in which we run our schools. Our policies and procedures should not only sustain but, champion learning. In other words, all of what we do, should directly support learning.

A study in the Providence Public School district in Rhode Island, revealed that at least 3.5 minutes per hour of instructional time is lost due to interruptions. Teachers in the study reported as much as 6.5 minutes for every hour of instruction time was lost. This suggests that students lose 10 to 20 days of instructional time in a typical 180-day school year. If a student were absent from school for that amount of time, in most cases, the student would be considered truant (Kraft & Monti-Nussbaum, 2021).

The study also concluded that interruptions have consequences beyond the measured time loss of the interruption itself. The momentum of the teacher's lesson is also lost, and the time needed to recapture the attention of the students and subsequently the reteaching of large amounts of material, should also be considered (Kraft & Monti-Nussbaum, 2021).

Not included in the list above are student behavior and major societal events like the current COVID-19 pandemic, leading to student absences and quarantines. If there was a time, where the revision, implementation and consistent practice of procedures was essential, it is now. Alas, many teachers report feeling high levels of stress, chaos, and disorder. "The level of stress is exponentially higher. It's like nothing I've experienced before" (Cardoza, 2021).

As learning organizations with the aim of teaching and learning, as schools we should embody the definition of a learning community. Schletchy (2005) defines a learning community as, "a group of persons who are bound together by the pursuit of common questions, problems or issues. They have developed clear norms and procedures that ensure that this pursuit goes forward in a way that honors the ideals of mutualism, collegiality, trust, loyalty, and friendship while showing a bias for hard-nosed analysis and concrete action."

Concrete action is what is required to create order in the chaos. An environment where despite the turmoil transpiring in the outside world, a school can be a reliable place for both students and teacher alike. An environment where what is expected, occurs. An environment where students can engage in their learning without repeated interruption (Schletchy, 2005). This type of environment allows for student engagement. Student engagement leads to student learning, again the aim and purpose of schools.

According to Schletchy (2005), ... “the creation of an environment supportive of giving engagement a central focus will require bringing about change in many of the systems that shape behavior in schools – for example, evaluation systems, induction systems, and power and authority systems.”

Schools should be run professionally. This includes hundreds of small tasks occurring daily completed by faculty and staff, all of whom should agree on how those tasks should be accomplished. Procedural tasks should be accomplished with the aim to minimize interruption to learning and to keep our purpose of educating students in mind. All of what we do in a school should promote and reflect our aim to educate students.

While many factors impact student learning, many of them being external and uncontrollable by the school, as school leaders we should have policies and procedures in place that will support the learning of all students. In the Providence study, school leaders reported 58% fewer interruptions per day than occurred (Kraft & Monti-Nussbaum, 2021). Working with the staff to identify and categorize the interruptions can lead to finding solutions to minimize the interruptions as much as possible.

Creating a system of policies and procedures for our schools is imperative. According to Schletchy, it is one of the most strategic things one can do as a leader. It is the foundation for all that one will do (2005). It should point to the vision and mission of the school, which may vary school to school, but at its core should focus on educating students. It is important to consider, how we do things in our schools sends and the message it sends to teachers, students, families, and the community about what is valued by the school and its leadership.

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