



It's About Time

Learnings from a staffing innovation pilot

Spring 2023 Update

During professional development in August 2021, when most teachers first returned from the year of virtual school, Dr. Tracy White looked around at the faculty of Paul Public Charter School. She saw far more than the usual jitters. Multiple teachers were in tears. “There were all the usual stressors of teaching,” the CEO says, “and new problems. We were still in the midst of the pandemic, and for the past year they had experienced a greater semblance of balance between the personal and the professional. For once, they’d had a home life they could see during daylight hours, and they missed their lives.”

At Paul and many other schools, last year was as difficult as that beginning. Students returned from virtual school with greater academic and social-emotional needs, and teaching felt far less sustainable. Dr. White ended the year convinced that serious change was needed in what she asked of teachers—and convinced that students, too, deserved changes in how their education works.

She wasn’t alone. In spring 2022, Education Forward DC funded a staffing innovation pilot to support schools testing new approaches to improve teacher satisfaction and retention. During the short pilots, schools tried small solutions, with small, but meaningful, success. We shared out learnings from the pilots in August 2022 via a white paper and webinar. This update to our original white paper highlights key learnings from three schools—one of our pilot schools, and two other local education agencies—trying more radical approaches to address the challenge of teacher sustainability.

Read the full white paper at www.edforwarddc.org/itsabouttime.

“A very small thing can make a difference. It is important to ask teachers what they want, but then any step forward can be a really good step.”

– Participating School Leader



Changing the Workweek

Last year, the **Paul Public Charter School** team saw the need for teachers to, as Dr. White says, “establish a healthy work-life balance,” while they kept improving academic performance and supporting students’ social-emotional growth. Paul had seen success with virtual learning, both in the 2020-21 school year and during Covid-related absences the following year. Virtual learning isn’t the same, Dr. White says, but its skills are necessary for both college and work. This year at Paul, almost every Friday is for virtual learning.

Everyone at Paul still works and learns during a five-day week. Virtual Fridays start with town-hall meetings for middle and high school students, including social-emotional activities and attendance taking. Students must have their cameras on to count as present. Town halls are followed by two rotations of small-group instruction for remediation, content support, SAT/PSAT prep,

and support for the 75 students in dual-enrollment college classes. Students then have an asynchronous learning block, using various online platforms, and teachers have time for meetings. The student day ends at 1pm, with teachers working independently or in meetings until 4pm. If students have too many absences, or if families request, they come in person to work at Paul with adult supervision.

So far, virtual Fridays are an all-around success, but Dr. White acknowledges that scheduling and coordinating for 700 kids “has been a heavy lift.” It’s worth it, she says: Paul currently has no teacher vacancies, which is unusual both in DC and around the country. Paul has also seen significant improvement in staff attendance, and a recent survey shows that parents overwhelmingly support virtual Fridays. Dr. White says she was honest with staff that “if they don’t show up, we can’t do this.” Of course, Paul is also watching student data carefully to ensure that their learning is on track. The middle school was named an EmpowerK12 Bold Performance School for 2022, and they are determined to maintain and improve their performance.

Paul’s experience suggests that radical change is possible and that policymakers and families are open to it. The Public Charter School Board approved a charter amendment for Paul to pilot virtual Fridays this year, with follow-ups on parent satisfaction and student academic data. The school complies with OSSE attendance rules, as students are marked present when their faces are seen. And Dr. White says that families are on board with the change to “make sure we can put the best, wellest adults in front of their children.”

Rethinking Learning Structures

In last year’s staffing innovation pilot, several schools found ways to give teachers an additional half-hour of flexible time or an extra planning period per week. This year, **E.L. Haynes Public Charter School** has created a significantly larger block of non-student-facing time for teachers.

Haynes turned to teacher teams for ways to improve teacher sustainability, and left it up to those teams to decide which idea to pilot. Their elementary school teachers suggested a grade level to get an extra half-day of planning every two weeks. Students at that grade level would do enrichment and learning activities with community partners. The elementary students wouldn’t lose in-person learning time, and other teachers wouldn’t have to take on additional students or lose their own planning time.

Haynes has begun the pilot this calendar year, says Rikki Hunt Taylor, chief academic officer. It’s not quite as planned: the logistics of arranging community partners has been challenging, though she hopes for increasingly arts-focused experiences in the months to come. The timing, instead of a more frequent half-day, has become a full day once per quarter. While the grade-level teachers plan, students attend their specials classes, complete blended learning assignments, and work on curriculum-aligned activities supervised by substitute teachers and other staff. The implementation this year continues to evolve, and, Hunt Taylor says, “I’m really excited, for next year, about being able to get students learning in different ways outside of the usual academic blocks.”



Changing the Role

Washington Yu Ying Public Charter School participated in Education Forward DC's spring pilot and focused on adding flexible time to teachers' schedules. After the pilot concluded, grade-level teams used the summer to propose their own forms of flexibility, such as an additional weekly planning period or late arrival for each teacher. Based on teacher feedback, Yu Ying has also adjusted its model for teacher scheduling.

Like teachers at other schools, classroom teachers at Yu Ying expressed a desire for more flexibility and variety in their work days. At this Chinese language immersion school, students spend some of their days with a Chinese teacher and some of their days with an English teacher. In previous years, in addition to classroom teachers, Yu Ying has had an "intervention teacher" role to provide additional support across classrooms. The intervention teacher has a more variable day as they move among student groups. This year, Yu Ying has combined the classroom and intervention teacher roles. As students rotate between their Chinese and their English classes, teachers rotate between teaching a full classroom and working with individuals and small groups as an intervention teacher.

Amy Quinn, director of teaching and learning, says that "teachers feel heard and have more opportunities to collaborate with their colleagues, to interact and improve." They also get up close with small groups of students as they struggle and progress. Some teachers work as intervention teachers with a grade below or above their classroom's grade, which provides better understanding of vertical curriculum alignment, as well as an opportunity to maintain relationships with last year's students or get to know next year's.

All schools have plenty of adult roles other than classroom teacher. Teachers' well-being, and their teaching, can improve if schools find new ways to remix those varied jobs.



Common Themes: Listen to Teachers, Improve for Students

In our reflections on the spring pilot, we recognized the importance of having teachers at the table when innovating on their behalf. The experiences of schools this year highlights the importance of deep engagement with what teachers want. E.L. Haynes turned directly to teacher teams to come up with ideas for sustainability, as did Yu Ying, whose leaders also heard feedback that required real changes to their teaching structure. Paul's leaders were willing to empathize with the challenges of full-time in-person teaching even when it required a different approach and a charter amendment.

Other DC schools and local education agencies are in the process of working with teachers on possible future changes to their roles and structures. The ability to solve the problems of the teaching profession will come from hearing both teachers' struggles and their ideas.

Of course, it's not really a solution if it's bad for students. These schools' approaches show that, while improving teachers' schedules will require changes to students' experience, those changes can be positive. At Paul, students are getting increased small-group instruction and learning to learn online. Tracy White points out: "colleges are not going back to all brick and mortar. There is a new imperative to ensure your kids are college and career ready by teaching them how to learn in a virtual environment." At Haynes, students have academic enrichment and will, in the future, experience arts programming experiences with their community partners. And at Yu Ying, students get interventions from those who know the curriculum best, and the interventions feed back more easily into the grade level curriculum.

These changes show that, with time and effort, radical moves can support teachers' desire for increased flexibility and innovate with what's best for students.