



It's About Time

Learnings from a staffing innovation pilot

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Executive Summary

In spring 2022, in response to local leaders' concerns about teacher retention, Education Forward DC funded a staffing innovation pilot to support schools in exploring how they might innovate on their staffing model to increase teacher satisfaction and boost retention. The project was simple but ambitious: schools opted in to receive 50 hours of consultant support to pilot an innovative approach to their staffing before the end of the 2021-22 school year.

While no schools in the pilot pursued any innovation as radical as a four-day workweek for teachers, they elevated important learnings for other school leaders seeking to improve the teacher experience during a challenging period.

Overall, schools' experiences in the pilot revealed that there is not a clear solution to teacher sustainability. Schools found that freeing up more time for teachers is difficult, but possible in small amounts; some schools explored ways to reduce teachers' non-instructional student-facing time, while others sought to improve the amount and quality of teacher planning time. Other schools realized that more time was not necessarily the best solution to improve the teacher experience given current constraints; in some cases, teachers needed better instructional support or a reduced planning burden to make their jobs more sustainable.

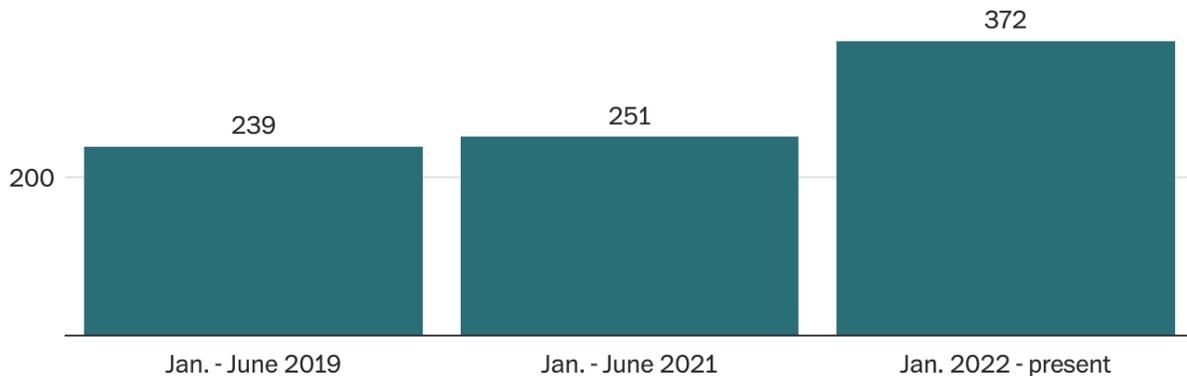
The mixed success of the pilot across participating schools also highlighted some useful lessons about the opportunity for innovation during the pandemic. Even with consultant support, many school leaders found it difficult to think creatively about new approaches, and to lead teachers to do the same, while battling the exhaustion of last school year. Pilots were most successful when there was strong alignment across the leadership team and an existing level of comfort among staff about the idea of mid-year experimentation. The pilots demonstrated that even small-scale shifts can have meaningful impact on teacher experience, but more radical solutions to teacher sustainability will require larger investments of time and resources.

Context

Washington, DC is suffering from the nationwide crisis in the teaching profession. While data on charter schools and on year-to-year retention are not yet available, DC Public Schools recently reported dramatically increased resignations in the first half of this year.

Teacher Resignations in D.C. Public Schools

Charting the number of teacher resignations in D.C. Public Schools across the past four academic years.*



*The district did not provide data for Jan.-June 2020.

Source: D.C. Public Schools

HANNAH NATANSON / THE WASHINGTON POST

Schools in our city recognize the need to make the teaching profession more sustainable. The massive disruption of the pandemic, and over a year of remote school, radically shifted how teaching worked. Crisis approaches often included more flexible time and less structure for teachers. Schools reported that the return to full-time, in-person schedules has exacerbated the challenges of teacher burnout, while student needs have only increased. Of course, while the pandemic has intensified the challenges of teaching, the problems in the profession are not new. How do we make it possible to structure the role otherwise?

This spring, in response to requests from school leaders in its portfolio, Education Forward DC funded pilot projects at seven schools and networks eager to figure out how. These schools received fifty hours of consultant support coupled with periodic cohort meetings to share their findings, insights, and plans. The only requirement was, this spring, to pilot some innovative approach to staffing in light of the crisis in teacher retention. No additional funding was associated with the pilot: the project was within the current bounds of school staffing costs.

Schools found it challenging to make significant shifts to their staffing or scheduling models in such a short time frame. While the pilots did not all proceed as planned, they elevated important learnings for other leaders seeking to improve the teacher experience during a challenging period. The schools explored topics including teacher flex time ([Washington Yu Ying](#)); instructional staff supports ([Ingenuity Prep](#), [Washington Leadership Academy](#), [Thurgood Marshall Academy](#)); staff well-being ([Social Justice School](#)); best practices for teacher planning time ([Friendship Schools](#)); and teacher workload ([Mundo Verde](#)).

Crises always open possibilities: one leader said, “I always used to think that because of A you have to do B, but now I’m questioning A, so maybe we end up with C.”

In addition to previous research on teacher retention, lessons from these pilots should inform schools and other stakeholders who want to prevent a teacher exodus and the problems that turnover creates for our children. These lessons fall into two categories: innovative strategies to improve conditions for teachers and approaches to the innovation process itself.

Staffing Innovation: New Directions

There are some schools around the country trying radical solutions such as [four-day school weeks](#) for teachers and students (and one, in [Wisconsin](#), beginning a four-day week for teachers and five-day week for students). The DC schools in our pilot took steps within their current basic structures, looking to significantly improve the teacher experience without dramatically changing their instructional model. In some cases, the leaders arrived at different solutions than what they originally anticipated, especially as they collaborated with teachers throughout the project.

Strategies piloted

Flexible time

Several schools found that **freeing up more time for teachers is difficult, but possible in small amounts**. Washington Leadership Academy PCS, which already offers higher-than-standard planning time, found that its teachers preferred adding a few larger planning chunks, such as half-day departmental meetings and professional development days across the school year, to significant schedule changes. Washington Yu Ying PCS, on the other hand, piloted an approach to give classroom teachers the opportunity to come in late or leave early once per week. Teachers took on the additional responsibility of leading a two-classroom community meeting while their grade-level partners took advantage of the flexible time. The school surveyed teachers after the pilot and found positive results. As one leader said, “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.”

Changes to student supervision

One approach to creating more time for teachers is to reduce their amount of non-instructional, student-facing time. Like Yu Ying’s community meetings, this could be accomplished by distributing work differently among teachers. It could also mean more student-facing time for non-instructional staff, such as during lunch or recess. Schools debated the costs and benefits of redistributing student supervision. As one leader said, “You’re going to need a higher level of consistency of culture if you’re going to take teachers off a lot of these places where they now supervise.” Another reminded us that “all the moments we are with children are instructional: we watch them play and we understand their relationships, we understand their development.” Teachers appreciate opportunities for late arrivals and early departures, but arrival and dismissal are often all-hands-on-deck moments for schools.

Improved collaboration

Schools found that teachers don’t just want more flexible time; they want more intentional and productive collaborative time. Improved systems for such time can support and retain teachers -- as well as coaches and teacher leaders -- while improving results for students. Schools that worked in this area tried to plan forward: what are all the adult interactions needed, and how much time do they need to

fulfill the instructional model? Can leaders check the assumptions about collaborative time in their current schedule, then make changes to better reflect the realities of instructional improvement? For instance, Ingenuity Prep PCS now plans increased support for teacher leaders in their Early Childhood Academy, including additional time for their coaching responsibilities. Similarly, Thurgood Marshall Academy PCS has reworked their master schedule to create more time for departmental collaboration and coaching by department chairs. Some schools saw a need to use coaching and supervision to reorient instructional expectations that changed during the pandemic. As one school leader reported, “There’s been a lack of accountability as we try to make sure people don’t jump off the ledge, but a lot of our classrooms are a lot less rigorous. How can we get that back on track in a way that’s palatable for teachers?”

Improved Planning Time

One kind of non-student-facing time already built into school schedules is planning time. With attention to both sustainability and results, **several schools examined their approach to planning time.** Friendship PCS focused their inquiry on the *amount*, *use*, and *quality* of planning time: what are the best practices for scheduling and systems, and how do those lead to teacher satisfaction and student results? Several schools are trying to create more planning time, while others are asking, if teachers already have more than 90 minutes of planning, why do they still feel so stretched? At Mundo Verde PCS, leaders saw sustainability ultimately as a question of teacher capacity to manage the work in front of them. As a dual language immersion elementary school, their schedule is complex; they are prototyping schedule arrangements that would maintain the balance of languages but reduce the planning burden on individual teachers.

Some schools also noted the physical space challenges of planning and collaboration. Just finding a quiet place to meet or plan is a challenge at many schools, especially with the pandemic’s increased distancing and room use requirements (e.g., isolation spaces for symptomatic students). Teacher anxieties about space, and inability to focus on work during dedicated planning times, may increase frustration and burnout. Of course, in most DC schools, space was a challenge before the pandemic as well!

Common Themes: Equity, Wellness, Differentiation

Teachers are not the only staff in schools -- and not the only staff who are increasingly difficult to hire and retain. Especially as DC schools strive to hire adults who reflect their student populations, **new approaches to sustainability require attention to equity.** How much out-of-building time, office space, and flexibility do different teachers, and teachers vs. non-instructional staff, get? Are there racial and other demographic differences in who gets what? These considerations are especially important as some staff continue to work from home or have hybrid schedules. Schools in our pilot struggled with trying to create equitable opportunities for flexible time and help their communities recognize that equal isn’t always fair. One leader told us, “equity is making sure that one group doesn’t bear the burden. It’s not done by making everyone suffer. It’s done by listening to what is a problem for people and helping solve that problem.”

Burnout is a problem across school roles. So **schools are attending to wellness for staff as well as students.** One leader reported: “People say, ‘but this is about the kids.’ Actually, it’s about the adults, because you don’t have anyone to take care of the kids if the adults aren’t there.” The Social Justice School is integrating adults, not just students, into its school-wide wellness plan. Those schools that are trying to create more flexible time for staff are explicit about promoting staff wellness and combating burnout culture. One leader put it succinctly: “If teachers aren’t well, the schools aren’t well.” Several

leaders are trying to bring cohesiveness and transparency to the various wellness and time initiatives that are already going on at their schools. They want to figure out what’s actually making a difference for staff members and to help teachers recognize what flexibility they already have. Washington Yu Ying created a table of options (Figure 1) as part of their presentation to staff about new ideas to pilot.

NOW	Yu Ying's Why	What is it	nurture	innovate	rigour	diversity	collaboration
Collaborative Planning Time	Collaboration is a cornerstone of our success. Teams need time for plan for their grade level and students' learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 45 minutes/week during specials 1 hour per week 2.5 hours on Fridays 	★	★	★		★
Dedicated Break/Personal Time	Everyone needs time during the day to take a breath!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 30 minutes per day of lunch break At least 30 minutes per day planning break 	★	★			★
Paid Time Off	Time off each month, and regularly throughout the year, is important to rejuvenate. Time off on school days for personal reason is also important to well-being.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 33 paid holiday days 10 personal/sick days 	★			★	
Dedicated PD time	Being a lifelong learner is not just a goal for students. Dedication to supporting educators growth, both within YY AND through outside sources is integral to our community success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 weeks in August, 3 full days in the year, Whole school and individual PD days for staff 		★	★	★	★
Wellness Fridays	Educators have to be there for their students; and also need to have time to take care of themselves.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Friday per month staff leave at 1:30 	★	★		★	
Parent Collaboration Days	Relationship building is fundamental to us. Time with families to collaborate on learning goals and needs continues to build trusting relationships in our community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 Goal Setting days 2 Student Led Conference days 	★		★		★
Team Planning Sessions	Inquiry planning and collaboration take time and creativity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3 Friday Half Day Planning Sessions No Sub Plans needed; Specialists take over grade while planning 	★	★		★	★

FIGURE 1

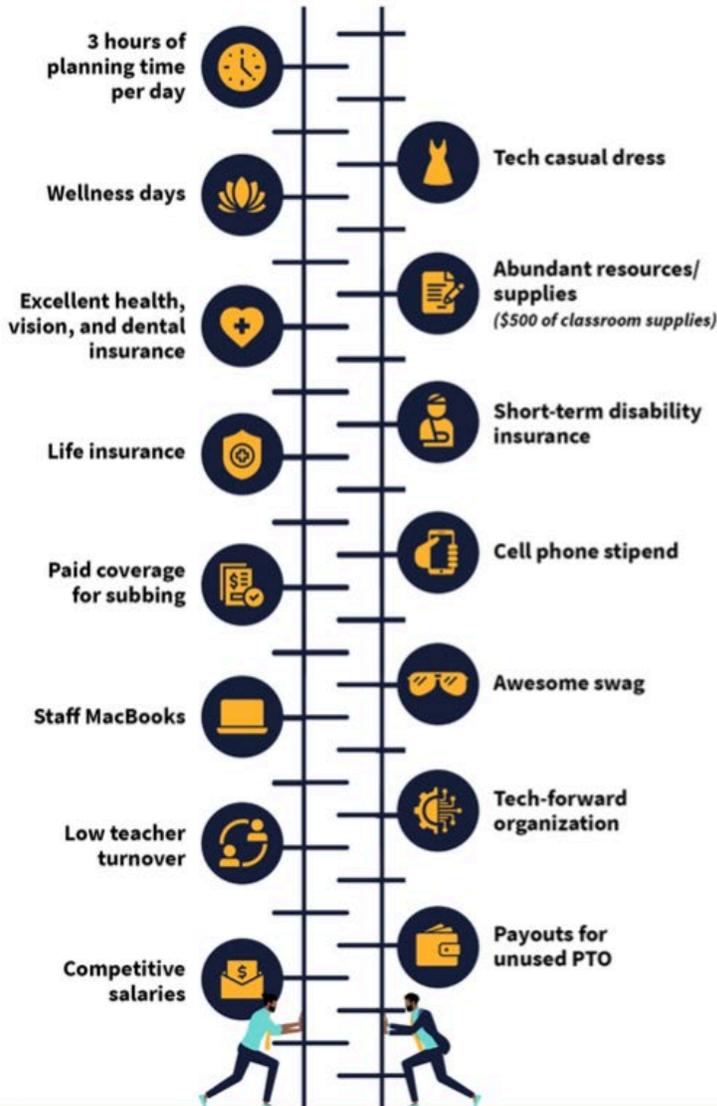
Washington Leadership Academy created a one-pager (Figure 2) for staff recruitment but also uses it internally.

These schools are publicizing teachers’ planning and flexible time alongside other professional supports such as coaching and curriculum. Positive feelings of community and efficacy are known to reduce burnout; while time is a crucial factor in job sustainability, these other factors can be leveraged to improve teacher retention.

Of course, both intention and impact matter: if these steps aren’t making teachers and other staff feel better, they aren’t working. One leader suggested that **schools can create flexibility menus where teachers see possible options that work for them.** For instance, a teacher who has children may prioritize leaving in time to pick them up from the bus stop while for another teacher, lunch duty is the greatest pain point each day; another teacher told her executive director, “I need one morning a month to get all of my paperwork done.” School leaders should strive to find out what matters to their people, and what each person needs to make their job feel sustainable.

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FIGURE 2

Staffing Innovation: Process Matters

Including Teachers

With a focus on staffing and sustainability of the teacher role, schools need to include teacher voice in innovation. **Successful pilots included teachers “at the table” iteratively throughout the process.** As one leader said, there can be a “disconnect between leaders’ concept of what’s best for teachers and teachers’ concept of what’s best for them. Getting the data on what people need and want is so important.” The iteration is crucial because it can be challenging at the beginning of the process, even for teachers, to name the root causes of unsustainability. Teacher voice throughout the pilot led some schools to shift their approaches along the way, as teachers gained confidence in leadership’s intentions and developed new ideas about which structural changes would be helpful. Pilot participation also built relational trust as discussions about sustainability improved staff confidence that leaders cared about their well-being. These discussions also helped leaders make sure they were solving for the right things: what is it that teachers really want? How do you match solutions to the actual problems? How do you differentiate for the fact that different adults want and need different things?

Including Students

Some schools, particularly high schools, **included students in the process.** Thurgood Marshall Academy opened classroom discussions about scheduling to a consultant, helping inform their master scheduling for the upcoming year. Washington Leadership Academy created student focus groups to discuss teaching at the school, which will shape future coaching support for faculty. On the other hand, one leader raised that family engagement efforts seem lower across the city at this moment of exhaustion. In future such processes, will there be a through-line to parents, as issues like teacher sustainability are obviously important to (and resonate with) families?

Shared Buy-In

The pilot process itself had mixed success at schools. For the schools where it worked best, the idea of a pilot made innovation easier to accept. One leader reported: “It’s okay if it fails, and it’s easier to get buy-in from skeptical staff members since we’re just testing and collecting feedback.” **Shared buy-in within leadership teams also led to success.** School executive directors opted into the pilot, but were not always deeply involved in the pilot process itself. Schools were most successful when executive directors were able to carve out sufficient time to remain involved and there was strong alignment across leadership team members.

Culture of Piloting

The consultants worked to set expectations around piloting and to help schools structure their efforts and data collection. One school reported that more resources on designing and testing experiments, and why to do so, would have been helpful. **The most successful pilots seemed to take place at schools which already had strong cultures of piloting and innovation.** Another leader reported that such an effort would not work at her previous school, which had a strong culture of slower-paced, collaborative deliberation.

Innovating Despite Exhaustion

At the beginning of the process, some schools dreamed of radical measures such as four-day teacher work weeks. We found that the pilot’s time frame did not allow the level of restructuring such changes

would require. **Two years into COVID, general exhaustion and change fatigue limited schools' capacity for innovation.** Schools had to integrate this resource with other projects, challenges, and opportunities, and, if they had less capacity to do so, had no choice but to find low-hanging fruit. For instance, as important as teacher voice is, leaders found a delicate balance between balancing already-intense demands on teacher time with the commitment a more intensive process would take. Some schools relied on previous survey data and conversations, or leveraging existing structures for teacher engagement, to achieve this balance.

Capacity is now a major challenge at the leadership level, too! Some leaders worried they might be overlooking possible options because they weren't able to lift their heads up enough from their current practices. Several said that a "menu" of options for how schools might choose to reimagine their schedules would have been helpful (although they recognized that there aren't many examples of real-world successes in flexible schedules). As one leader said, "It's really hard to get the people exhausted by doing the work to do the creative thinking." Some also caution that, if a baseline quality of instruction and accountability are not in place, more flexibility could backfire and result in lower-quality teaching practices. On the other hand, schools appreciated support with some of the deeper reflection and strategic planning that leadership teams have not had time for in the past two years. Several leaders reported feeling energized by the chance to think in this way and explore new possibilities.

Lessons Learned

The pilot process created space for innovation. To make even more dramatic improvements in teacher retention -- with downstream improvement in student learning -- we will need more radical approaches. Schools are making positive changes based on the pilot. These innovations will make a difference, but the pilot showed clearly that **there are no easy answers to teacher sustainability**. The process showed the distance between what educators dream of and what, given current budgets and structures, it's possible to do. More radical solutions to teacher sustainability will require larger investments of time and resources.

Acknowledgements

Education Forward DC funded this pilot to support schools in exploring how they might innovate on their staffing model to increase teacher satisfaction and boost retention. Schools opted in to receive 50 hours of consultant support to pilot an innovative staffing approach before the end of SY2021-22. [Simon Rodberg](#) served as lead consultant with consultants [Dahlia Aguilar](#), [Jeanne Chang](#), [Jessica Wodatch](#) supporting participating schools: Friendship Public Charter Schools, Ingenuity Prep, Mundo Verde, Social Justice School, Thurgood Marshall Academy, Washington Leadership Academy, and Washington Yu Ying.

Education Forward DC envisions a DC where students starting furthest from opportunity can chart their own path and thrive. We accelerate the work of visionary education leaders to foster a city of high-quality, equitable public schools for every DC student and family. Through a dedicated focus on recovering from the pandemic's negative impacts, growing high-quality public school options, addressing racial inequities, recruiting and retaining excellent leaders, and fostering equity-centered change, we believe DC can continue its progress and become a national model as the first city to guarantee every student access to an excellent education. Over the next five years, we aim to double the proportion of schools providing students with the learning experiences they need to thrive.

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