

Elementary Teacher Planning Time: Finding Innovation through Focused Collaboration

Katie M. Ridgway, MBA
Director of Strategic Initiatives
Harford County Public Schools
Bel Air, MD

Abstract

Local districts can benefit from a collaborative process for refreshing their master schedules to increase teacher planning time. Alongside national models for organizing the school day, local districts must account for regional factors such as resources, historical practices, community expectations, changing state requirements, negotiated agreements, and core values. The district featured in this research undertook a comprehensive focus group process, engaging diverse stakeholders to identify opportunities and challenges in elementary school schedules, with a specific focus on increasing teacher planning time. The outcomes provide actionable steps for the district, an assessment of multiple innovative scheduling ideas, and evidence of the universal value of collaboration in driving change.

Key Words

planning time, innovation, collaboration, reimagining the use of time, master scheduling, elementary school teachers, teacher planning

School districts have distinctive circumstances surrounding the organization of the school day and how time is used or valued due to historical, political, and environmental factors that are as diverse and multifaceted as students are themselves (Innovative Approaches, 2013). When districts reconsider the use of time in a school day, it is an endeavor to find an ideal balance that serves students' academic achievements, data-driven best practices, the responsibilities of teachers and staff, the legal constraints of the district, and parent and community expectations.

Districts throughout the U.S. have created model school day schedules filled with innovation, creativity, and flexibility (Innovative Approaches, 2013; Merritt, 2016; Benner & Partelow, 2017), but the sweet spot of master scheduling, instructional minutes, teacher planning, professional development, logistical constraints of bus routes, negotiations with unions, and local political pressures are not easily solved through a decree or mandate of a model schedule from another district or researched best practices. Instead, this level of change benefits from a multifaceted approach that includes the research and experience of other districts and honors local environments and practices.

The following case study explores the research and school day change processes conducted by a district, referred to here as HCPS (Harford County Public Schools), which serves 38,000 students and employs 5,400 full-time equivalent employees through fifty-five schools.

For this study, the district sought local qualitative data and co-creation of solutions with diverse stakeholders through a series of focus groups using human-centered design methodology (Luma System methods, 2023). [NOTE: The author completed LUMA

Institute's Practitioner Certification Program in January 2023 and is designated a Certified Practitioner of Human-Centered Design; <https://www.luma-institute.com/about-luma/>].

The focus groups consisted of three parts conducted over three months, with part one analyzing the goals and appropriateness of the research question, part two brainstorming solutions, and part three developing proposals for the superintendent. The methodology aimed to gather qualitative perspectives and unique recommendations (both in innovation and in the specificity of the district's needs) about increasing planning time for elementary school teachers.

Through the systematic review of the focus group processes and subsequent outcomes of the HCPS focus group series, district leaders can reflect on their own use of time, values, and challenges regarding teacher planning and co-creation opportunities for systemic change.

The Planning Time Imperative

The reasoning and momentum at HCPS for a study about planning time stemmed from a different 2022 HCPS study about COVID-19 pandemic innovations, of which a recommendation was generated to protect and increase planning time for teachers (Ousmanou, 2022).

The goal of the 2022 research was to ensure that the district's specific pandemic experiences could inform the future. The district observed how the experience gained by education professionals during the pandemic changed perspectives on a school's role in a community, the use of technology in a classroom, the value placement of non-curriculum services, what time and tools teachers need to succeed, and the inexorable link between physical and mental health and learning. For the pandemic innovation study,

staff members and parents were interviewed to collect data specifically on innovations from the COVID-19 pandemic worth preserving. The data were analyzed for which pandemic adaptations were most important to stakeholders and which innovations helped the district move forward and meet the Board of Education strategic plan goals (Strategic Plan, 2017).

The four key recommendations were:

- (1) Invest in the expansion, formalization, and further integration of technology initiatives in the district beyond the pandemic.
- (2) Explore more permanent funding strategies to keep extra daily substitute teachers at school sites.
- (3) Codify HCPS' commitment to prioritizing student and staff health and wellbeing.
- (4) Continue to explore opportunities to increase planning time for teachers. (Ousmanou, 2022, p. 6)

The final recommendation about planning time was unexpected and provided a novel view of district pandemic experiences. The context of the participant's perceptions of planning time came from an HCPS practice during virtual and hybrid instruction portions of the COVID-19 pandemic, whereby students and teachers enjoyed a weekly asynchronous day of instruction. Students used the asynchronous school day to complete assignments, and teachers used it to prepare lessons and provide targeted interventions.

Teachers expressed much appreciation and support for the dedicated time and space to provide individualized support to students, plan lessons, and provide outreach to families. Through the interview process, teachers strongly asserted that this full day of planning time improved their wellbeing (Continuity of Learning Innovations, 2022). The desire and

need to promote dedicated planning time has been evident at HCPS, even as the pandemic fades into the past.

Specific to HCPS elementary schools, most schedules and teacher duties do not allow time outside of a union-negotiated, contractual daily forty-five minutes of protected planning time.

In past practice, HCPS instituted half days for elementary schools to give teachers more planning time. As this practice evolved, these half days became countywide for all school levels, and leaders began to schedule professional development for teachers, thus removing the additional planning time for elementary teachers. Elementary planning time was ultimately squeezed due to growing needs for professional development on new instructional practices, such as the science of reading, or new mandates, such as behavioral health training.

In addition to COVID-19 and the 2022 recommendation to leverage new practices and perceptions surrounding planning time, the growing demands on classroom teachers contributed to an imperative to ensure adequate planning time for effective teaching and learning. Such demands are faced by districts throughout the country due to the pressures of changing education environments, mandates, and responsibilities.

Many authors acknowledge the growing demands on teachers (Innovative Approaches, 2013; Merritt, 2016; Benner & Partelow, 2017), whereby "teaching is more complex in this decade than ever before as educators adapt to new curricular reforms and assessments, implement social and emotional learning programs, and plan learning for an increasingly diverse student population (Merritt, 2016. para. 4)." At HCPS, the specific demands on teachers

include but are certainly not limited to transitioning to a new online learning platform, a district emphasis on literacy starting at early grades, implementing state law with large-scale education reform requirements, and a significant local and national teacher, support staff, and substitute shortage. HCPS also has experience with a growing population of students needing individualized support for behavior, mental health, English language acquisition, and special education services. These factors place a direct and heavy burden on classroom teachers, and adequate planning time is one method for easing this weight.

Nationally, education writers have compared American teachers' schedules with international high-performing education systems, such as Singapore and Finland, and concluded that there is value in out-of-classroom time for teacher efficacy in the classroom (Benner & Partelow, 2017; Merritt, 2016; Sparks, 2022). Additionally, Merritt (2016) gathered examples of teacher voice prioritizing planning time similar to the HCRC COVID-19 innovation survey. Merritt cites a survey of teachers from Wisconsin asserting that increased planning would have the "greatest positive impact (Merritt, 2016, para. 3)" on their ability to support student learning and also references a study where teachers claimed that lack of sufficient planning time impacted their choices to leave the classroom and served as a particular barrier to providing high-quality, evidence-based curriculum.

Other education professionals provide alternative views about planning time, believing that students need more (not less) time with their teachers and that teachers, unlike other professionals, receive ample holidays and time off (Vilson, 2015). Whether in support or dissent about increasing planning time, the national discourse reflects the same desired outcomes as all districts in their mission and vision to serve all students.

Regardless of national trends and perceptions, HCPS desired specific systemic measures for its post-pandemic re-evaluation of time (Ousmanou, 2022). When coupled with growing pressures on academic outcomes, mandated individualized support for more students, and the sustainability of the teaching profession, evaluating planning time and district philosophy on the use of school time continues to be critical for this district. Ultimately, the 2002 pandemic innovation study recommendation and additional local demands led the superintendent of HCPS to ask: *How do we add five hours of planning time a week for elementary school teachers?*

Focus groups

To address the challenge and opportunity presented by the bold planning time question, the superintendent conceptualized a qualitative focus group framework that would include participation from teachers, teacher specialists, principals, university professors, central office leaders, college student interns, and high school students in a future teacher academy. The impetus for this particular group of individuals with different expertise and experience came from the superintendent's goal to leverage such differences to create new ideas.

Believing that only through diverse collaboration can new and distinctive ideas emerge, the superintendent's philosophy fits Gray's 1989 definition of collaboration as a "process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible (Gray, 1989, p. 5)."

Using this definition of collaboration, the focus groups were formed with three unique groups, so three sets of diverse individuals could collaborate and provide three sets of data and subsequent recommendations, which could

be compared for holistic analysis and consideration. With this participation framework, the Director of Strategic Initiatives created a human-centered design (Luma System Methods, 2023) protocol for a three-part focus group series, with three groups of diverse individuals, conducted over three months to systematically break down the question, encourage creative thinking, and ultimately provide recommendations to the superintendent on how to provide additional planning time to elementary school teachers.

Part 1: Challenging the question

In part one of the focus group protocol, participants collaborated through human-centered design methods to explore the research question. Starting with *abstraction laddering*, the participants challenged whether the right research question was being asked in the first place and why it was being asked. Then, they followed the broader or more narrow issues arising from the exercise (Abstract Laddering, 2023). Groups changed the scope and focus of the question with broader questions and more specific, detailed questions.

Participants were encouraged to think outside their perspectives by considering the question from different lenses (e.g., what if you had unlimited resources?) and, ultimately, identified themes and patterns in their thinking. The protocol for theme identification, *affinity clustering*, involved combining the broader or narrow questions and ideas into groups based on similarity and then labeling the similarities as a theme (Affinity Clustering, 2023).

The emerging themes reflect values, priorities, concerns, and constraints that impact how schools could provide additional planning time. All groups had primary themes about teacher wellbeing and student learning outcomes. The themes created through the

protocol include (1) teacher physical and mental health priorities; (2) the importance of planning effectiveness, methods, and processes; (3) correlation with student needs and achievement; (4) awareness and consideration for curriculum needs; (5) administration considerations (e.g., Budget, Rules); (6) considerations of current or needed staffing structures; (7) use of time and schedules; (8) impact of recruitment and retention; and (9) impact of culture and climate (Ridgway, 2023).

Concerns, barriers, and counterarguments arose when dissecting whether asking for more planning was the right question. For example, included within the themes were concerns about having enough time in the day to meet curriculum pacing expectations, whether the quality of planning might be more important than the quantity of planning, and the sustainability of budgets and staffing.

These concerns were collected and examined in the process so that they could be weighed with the themes representing the positive impact of increased planning time and so they were included in considerations for solution findings and recommendations.

Part one of the focus group protocol stretched the groups' creative muscles as they unraveled their preconceived ideas and leaned into questioning the question. After examining the question, each group identified critical data needed to inform their decision-making and future focus group sessions.

Participants wanted to frame their future brainstorming with a better understanding of state and local scheduling constraints and national and local common practices. Four specific questions emerged, which were researched and provided back to the group for consideration in the subsequent sessions of the focus group protocol.

The first question focused on positioning the work in the broader state landscape: *How many instructional hours does HCPS provide compared to state requirements?* Elementary schools in the state must be open for at least 1080 hours a year, 180 school days, and open within a ten-month period. The district's 2022-2023 calendar for elementary planned for 6.5 hours a day for elementary schools, thirteen shortened days (early dismissal), and a total of 1,131 open hours. The schedule represents fifty-one hours above the state minimum, which participants appreciated understanding in their discussions as this gave room for creativity in the school day schedule, specifically for start and end times (Ridgway, 2023).

The next question centered on nationwide comparison: *What amount of planning time do teachers get around the country?* In 2017, Education Week published an article reviewing data collected through the National Council on Teacher Quality on daily teacher planning time. The author found that 24 districts provided an hour of planning time or more each day, 61 districts provided 45 minutes, 14 districts provided 30 minutes, and five provided 15 minutes (Loewus, 2017). With 45 minutes of daily planning time at HCPS, the district falls in line with the majority in this study.

The groups next questioned the curriculum and instruction needs: *What are content minimums for instruction?* In the district's state, instruction must meet content standards, but no regulatory or state-mandated specific minimum time is required to meet those standards.

For example, in Physical Education (PE), "provide in public schools an instructional program in physical education each year with sufficient frequency and duration to meet the requirements of the State

[curriculum] Framework for all students (COMAR 13A, 1986)." Districts may have individual Board of Education policies or administrative procedures about curriculum time. For this district, a Board Policy requires a minimum of 275 minutes per month for Elementary PE, but no other curriculum area has dictated time minimums (Health and Wellness Policy, 2023).

As standard practice, though, the district provides recommended time allotments for elementary schools for the core curriculum. For example, the mathematics allotment for grades one through five is 65 minutes, and since at least 1995, the English and language arts allotment has been 190 minutes (Ridgway, 2023).

Finally, the focus group participants expressed anecdotally that the thirty-three elementary schools in the district may have vastly different practices for protected planning time, collaborative planning, and additional time outside the classroom.

Participants asked: *What are HCPS schools currently doing for planning time beyond the negotiated 45 minutes?* Proving the anecdotes valid, thirty-one HCPS elementary schools responded to survey questions through the Department of Elementary Education Services with an array of practices around planning time.

All schools had unique responses and focus group participants were provided comprehensive responses from these diverse schools. For example, one school stated, "In kindergarten through grade three, we have collaborative planning from 3:00-3:50 one day for each grade level, Monday through Thursday. The Unified Arts teachers cover the class. Grades four and five have collaborative time during chorus, as all students are in chorus (Ridgway, 2023, p. 9)." In comparison, another

school shared, "We have a wellness block once every three weeks that teachers can sign up for to get another planning block. This is managed by the PE teacher (Ridgway, 2023, p. 10)." With principals throughout the district already finding creative ways to add planning time, these ideas were provided to participants in detail for their systemic considerations.

After completing part one, all data were collated and provided to the participants to consider as they began part two. Armed with the data and themes of their work, participants could go back to their schools for further discussion and evaluation with peers and administrators, which fueled even broader thinking as they approached part two, where the actual work of brainstorming solutions and ideas would begin.

Part 2: Brainstorming and evaluation

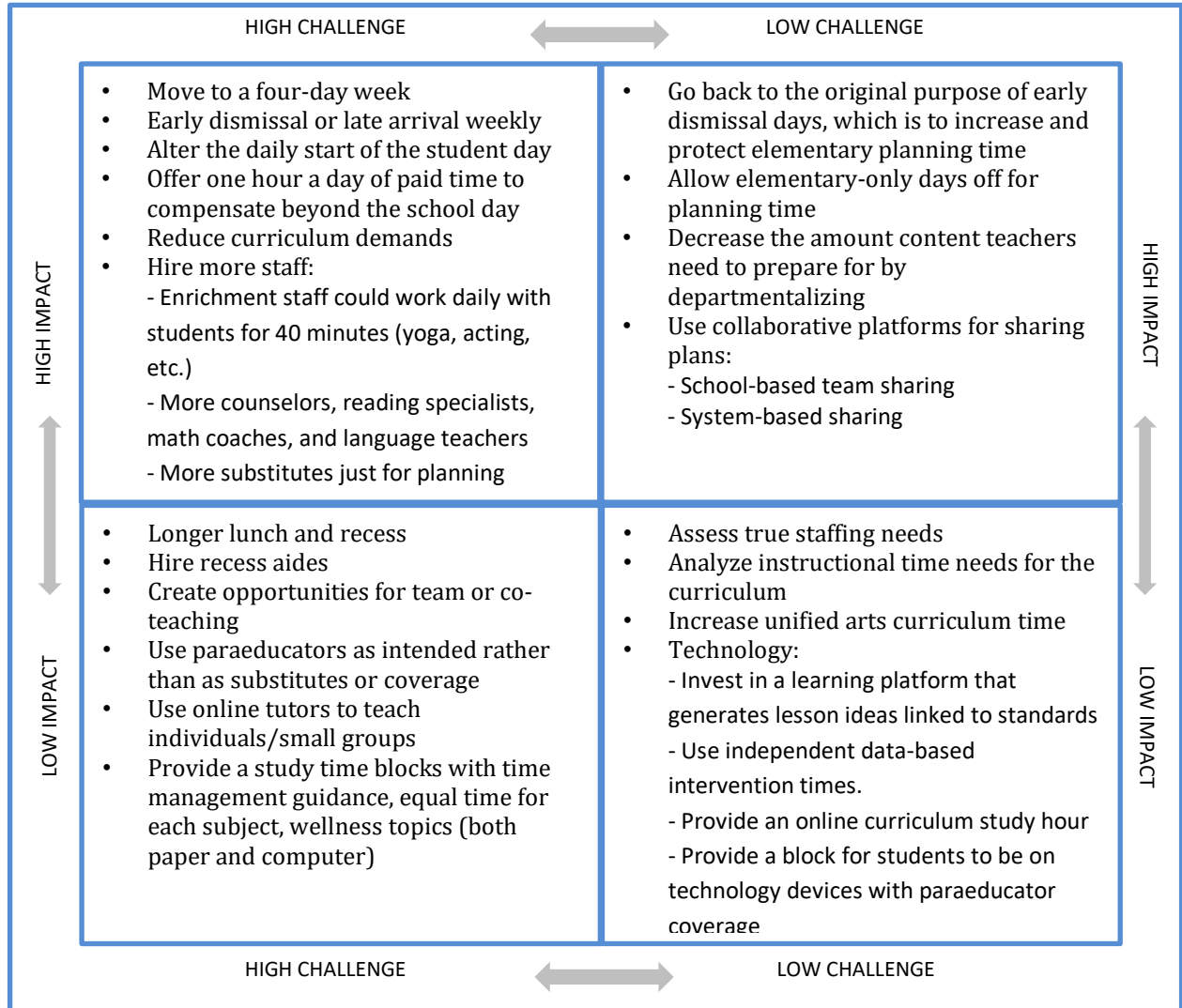
In part two of the focus group series, participants used their research and themes and participated in human-centered design brainstorming activities to identify concrete and actionable solutions for the planning time question. The protocol for brainstorming, *creative matrix*, involved a grid of all the previously identified beneficial themes from part one on an axis (e.g., improved mental health), with the other axis listing the ideas

representing enabling solutions (e.g., school day schedules) (Creative matrix, 2023). Participants crafted ideas of how to meet the desired positive benefit while considering logistics or barriers. Utilizing a philosophy that participants should develop ideas independently and then build off each other's ideas, groups were encouraged to present ideas with all levels of complexity, uniqueness, or simplicity. Groups then followed a protocol to *visualize the vote* to identify the solutions that resonated the most with the group so ideas would emerge that all found viable to explore further (Visualize the Vote, 2023).

Once generated, participants put all preferred ideas through a value-placement exercise and an impact-challenge exercise (Importance/Difficulty Matrix, 2023) to narrow down which ideas might be substantive and impactful as planning time recommendations to the superintendent.

The data from these exercises created a menu of solutions categorized by impact and challenge. Conceivably, low-challenge and high-impact solutions, such as relooking at the usage of half-days and departmentalization, could be more quickly implemented than high-challenge and high-impact strategies, such as changing the school day timeframe and hiring more staff for thirty-three elementary schools.

Figure 1

Impact-Challenge Results

Note: Participants placed solutions within the figure based on perceptions of how hard a solution would be to implement relative to how positive the impact would be for teachers.

The impact-challenge exercise helped groups visualize solutions that may be quick wins for the school district, solutions that might require long-term planning and resource reallocation, and solutions that may significantly impact families. The level of impact and challenge ultimately informed the groups on what solutions they believed may

best fit the specific culture, climate, and constraints surrounding HCPS.

Part 3: Creating recommendations

For the final part of the focus group series, groups now had established values, shared research, an understanding of the complexities of answering the question, new perspectives,

and a plethora of ideas to consider. Creative and unique recommendations emerged through diverse perspectives and systemic collaboration over the three-part focus group series. For part three, groups worked independently and unstructured to find a clear consensus on answering the superintendent's question: *How do we add five hours of planning time a week for elementary school teachers?* The groups crafted presentations with their chosen solutions to provide the superintendent.

Group 1 Recommendations to the Superintendent

Group one recommended the implementation of a focus day on Fridays. In this model, planning time and coverage for kindergarten through grade two could be in the morning and for grades three through five in the afternoon, and could alternate so grade levels can flip morning and afternoon timeslots as desired. To allow teachers to have this planning time on Fridays, students would engage in creative enrichment activities led by community partners or other staff.

Activities during the flexible time could include, but would not be limited to, interventions (primarily reading and math), guest speakers, Lego League, library, health department or healthy eating presentations, fire and police departments, good news assemblies, guidance counselors, yoga, puzzles and games, or music groups from high schools (Ridgway, 2023). This concept of providing enrichment time during the school day can be found in other models, such as Guilmette Elementary School, highlighted by Benner and Partelow (2017), Center for American Policy.

Group one touted focused Friday's potential for increased community partnership, project-based learning opportunities, and time for student wellness. By providing a solution that stays within the bounds of the current school day schedule, this idea has no impact on

families, and if used instead of half-days, it supports families who may need childcare on shortened school days.

Acknowledging the burden of logistics and resources, the group understood that successfully implementing their plan would be time-consuming and may create inequity of time amongst other staff not afforded such time planning time (e.g., special area teachers). With an understanding that the focused Friday concept is not quickly implemented, the groups identified other ideas they felt still had merit and were worth the superintendent's consideration, such as making early dismissal days whole days off for students, providing additional pay for planning outside the school day, and departmentalizing elementary schools.

Group 2 Recommendations to the Superintendent

Group two presented a menu of ideas, which added up to five hours or more of additional planning time for teachers. The group organized the menu based on the impact of the change on HCPS families, which the group found to be an important way to think about the solutions, as some ways to increase planning time might be easy for the district but quite hard for families.

In the group's minimal community impact category, they recommended reworking the existing instructional schedule, using five out of ten early dismissal days for planning time, reallocating collaborative planning, extending recess, using buddy class time, and adding an additional unified arts or physical education block each week. Within the recommendations for reworking the instructional schedule, the group specified a model where students would engage in three hours per week of Physical Education, structured indoor and outdoor play, social-emotional focused learning, soft skills practice, and career exploration.

The group recommended that additional unified arts and physical education staff, community partners, university partners, and volunteers lead these three-hour wellness blocks. This idea has a crossover with the first group's focused Friday approach, with a shared recommendation that enrichment can be provided to students through new avenues while teachers are released for planning time.

Within the increased community impact category, the group provided solutions that would adjust the elementary school start time for students daily, include a weekly delayed opening, or move HCPS to a four-day school week for students (Ridgway, 2023). To accomplish the four-day school week, the groups considered that time would be added to the open school days by thirty-five minutes and that although schools would be closed to students one day a week, teachers would have that day for planning time and other professional development opportunities.

With state minimums for number of school days in a year, this would require either a state legislative change to only count school time in hours or a lengthening of the district's school calendar for shorter summers. Unsurprisingly, the group found ultimate value in a four-day school week, as the motivation for the entire planning time endeavor came from the popularity of the four-day instructional week with one asynchronous day utilized during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, 900 districts throughout the U.S. have moved to this model as of September 2023, which has increased significantly from the 650 districts with a four-day school week reported in 2019 (Peetz, 2024).

Group 3 Recommendations to the Superintendent

The third group's recommendations to the superintendent involved three ways to increase planning time and one recommendation to

improve the implementation of any changes to the school day. For increasing planning, the group believed that HCPS should return the ten planned early dismissal days as unassigned planning time exclusively to elementary teachers.

Additionally, HCPS could have a weekly 75-minute late-arrival for students, increase recess time to thirty minutes daily, and provide recess coverage for general educators. As additional considerations, the group suggested that HCPS update and re-evaluate curriculum time recommendations, encourage departmentalization, and determine the viability of employing staff for recess coverage. For improving implementation, the group felt strongly that more educators should be represented in the focus group process and that the superintendent should make decisions after systemic feedback from elementary teachers (Ridgway, 2023).

Additional Collaboration: Teacher's Union

Acting on the recommendation for further engagement with educators, the president of the local teacher's union gathered teachers together to provide feedback on all the recommendations generated thus far to increase planning time for elementary teachers.

Teachers heard the recommendations directly from focus group participants through presentations and then spent time with questions, discussion, and debate. The teachers engaged in lively and robust discourse about the recommendations while reflecting on their pandemic planning experience, their daily planning time squeeze, and how different schools approach scheduling planning time quite uniquely. Using a human-centered design protocol, *rose, thorn, bud*, the teachers categorized the focus groups' recommendations based on positives, negatives, and potential (Rose, Thorn, Bud, 2023).

Teachers expressed consensus and immense support in two areas: using half-days for planning time and ensuring that additional planning time comes in more significant time segments, not in small, fifteen-minute increments. Teachers saw the potential and had an interest in the focus group recommendations around creative enrichment scheduling for half-day planning while students are in school for a full day, recess coverage and extension if staff are hired, late arrival days for students, departmentalizing, four-day school weeks, adjusting curriculum minimums, increasing the number of half days, asynchronous learning during the school day, and extra physical education.

Teachers were concerned and hesitant about other recommendations made through this process that were echoed in the results of the focus group impact-challenge exercises, such as whether staff could be hired to cover recess and the extensive logistics and planning needed for creative scheduling of half-day planning for teachers while students attend school full day. Finally, the idea of providing additional pay for teachers to extend their day for another hour of planning was a negative proposition for the participating teachers (Ridgway, 2023).

The value and insights gained from vetting the focus group recommendations with teachers in collaboration with the teacher's union provided critical perspectives to HCPS leadership and the superintendent when considering future commitments and strategies for addressing planning time at HCPS elementary schools.

Outcomes

With numerous models for giving more planning time to elementary teachers and with qualitative data about the relative value and support for each method, district follow-through was essential. HCPS published a

formal report on its website, *Elementary Teacher Planning Time: Strategic Focus Group Report* (Ridgway, 2023), which includes a commitment to implement recommendations through four action items.

Along with the public posting, the report was distributed to the HCPS Instructional Leadership Team and Senior Leadership Team, HCPS Elementary Principals, the Board of Education, the local teacher's union, the Budget Office, the Calendar Committee, and all staff through the HCPS newsletter. By publishing such a report, leaders throughout the district have a concrete source of information, priorities, and action items to consider. The following are the HCPS commitments published to honor the work of the focus groups, the feedback of the teacher's unions, and the spirit of the superintendent's call to action.

(1) Action Item #1: Central leadership team(s) review half days.

For the 2023-2024 school year, the Office of Organizational Development and the Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment collaborated to create a half-day plan, where five out of the ten half-days in the 2023-2024 were dedicated to planning time. The 2024-2025 schedule also follows this model.

(2) Action Item #2: Leadership and principal teams collaborate on short and long-term recommendations.

In March 2023, HCPS elementary principals received a presentation regarding the Strategic Focus Group Report. The Office of Elementary School Instruction and Performance provided leadership and forums for principal collaboration on short—and long-term recommendations (e.g., departmentalization, collaborative

planning, and Friday creative schedules).

- (3) *Action Item #3: Include recommendations that impact the budget in the FY25 budget process.* All recommendations requiring additional resources, such as teachers or recess aides, would be considered and prioritized, where possible, through the budget process each year, depending on local funding.
- (4) *Action Item #4: Share the formal Strategic Focus Group Report with the HCPS calendar committee for consideration in the 2024-2025 School Calendar. Include an elementary and secondary teacher on the calendar committee.* The chair of the HCPS calendar committee shared the Strategic Focus Group Report with the committee and included both elementary and secondary teacher voices in future calendar development committees.

Case Study Implications

Actionable concepts arose from the exercise that can inform all districts as they address their own school-day challenges: reimagining the use of time in the school day, increasing students' opportunities for physical activity, and the inherent value of district-specific collaboration for change efforts.

Consistent throughout the recommendations is reimagining the use of time in the school day, including curriculum time allotments, flexible enrichment scheduling, community partnerships, extended recess, and strategic use of assemblies. When considering reimagining time, the HCPS curriculum time allotment for English and language arts has been in place since 1995.

This historically accepted use of time is just one example of many ingrained past practices that remain today. Going through a process that challenges the school days' structure can benefit districts seeking ways to address new and emerging challenges in our schools. This is reflected nationally in emerging models of team teaching (Next Education Workforce, 2024), enrichment blocks (Benner & Partelow, 2017), longer school days (Innovative Approaches, 2013), and four-day school weeks (Peetz, 2024).

With many models to consider within local environments, there is a tremendous opportunity to relook at the assumptions in the school day schedule and make changes that reflect district values, whether it is for more planning time, more physical activities, or more academic offerings.

Throughout the HCPS process, there was a synergy of desire to increase physical activity for students through either reworking recess, adding additional physical education time, or providing other creative health and wellness offerings while at the same time providing additional planning time for teachers.

This opportunity is evident in all sets of data and recommendations from the HCPS focus group process and in the positive support of teachers in their review session. When reallocating resources and making a case for additional planning time, the opportunity to also implement additional physical and health time for students is a tremendous opportunity that benefits both teachers and students.

Also surfacing through the focus groups series was the immediate benefit of the methodology and collaboration to produce innovative recommendations. The methodology

expanded the participants' perspectives and reinforced their feelings of personal value to systemic decision-making. Feedback from participants indicated that the opportunity to work with different experts and to present to the superintendent provided a unique form of personal and professional development, as well as an improved understanding of the complex challenges faced by district leaders.

By having purposeful group participation (teacher, teacher specialist, principal, university professor, central office leader, college student intern, and a student aspiring to teach), each voice was represented and ensured that the dominance of one philosophy could not sway the process. True evaluation of ideas could occur with balance. Particularly impactful was the participation of the students, as it supported a positive group dynamic.

For districts throughout the country, the HCPS focus group process is worth considering for complex problem-solving. The systematic three-part process gave room, time, and space for innovation. By breaking this process into distinct parts over time, participants were given

room to address their preconceived ideas, hear from many others, research and learn from the wider education community, and reach a clear consensus about actionable recommendations. The time, space, and human-centered design protocols were essential in producing substantive and original action items that could directly support HCPS teachers.

Conclusion

Participants in the HCPS focus groups on planning were often reminded that if the answers were easy, they would already be integrated into the school district. If another district's model was easy to impose on schools, changing models based on best practices would be routine. As such, there is no conclusion with a single solution on how to add planning time for elementary teachers, but the resulting menu of methods, identified opportunities for change (including tying in more physical activity for students), data on value-placement, and administrative and teacher voice serves HCPS well for the future. At the very least and with forward progress, HCPS elementary teachers see more planning time in their schedules than before.

Author Biography

Katie Ridgway, MBA, is the director of strategic initiatives at Harford County Public School leading major change efforts including "The Blueprint for Maryland's Future." She holds degrees from Johns Hopkins and UMGC and is pursuing a DPA at West Chester University. E-mail: Katie.Ridgway@hcps.org

Acknowledgement: Sean W. Bulson, EdD, Superintendent of Schools, Harford County Public Schools

References

- Abstract Laddering*. (2023). Luma-Institute.com. Retrieved January 9, 2023. <https://www.luma-institute.com/abstraction-laddering/>
- Affinity Clustering*. (2023). Luma-Institute.com. Retrieved January 9, 2023. <https://www.luma-institute.com/affinity-clustering/>
- Benner, M. & Partelow, L. (2017, Feb 23). Reimagining the school day. *Center for American Progress*. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/reimagining-the-school-day/>
- Code of Maryland Regulations (COMAR), 13A § 04.13 (1986). https://www.marylandpublicschools.org/about/Documents/DCAA/PE/PE_COMAR_13A.04.13.pdf
- Creative Matrix*. (2023). Luma-Institute.com. Retrieved January 9, 2023. <https://www.luma-institute.com/creative-matrix/>
- Gray, B. (1989). *Collaborating: Finding common ground for multiparty problems*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Health and Wellness Policy*. (2023, June 12). Harford County Public Schools. <https://www.hcps.org/webfiles/WebFilesHandler.ashx?id=4531>
- Importance/Difficulty Matrix*. (2023). Luma-Institute.com. Retrieved January 9, 2023. <https://www.luma-institute.com/visualize-the-vote/>
- Innovative approaches to school time: field hearing of the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, United States Senate, One Hundred Eleventh Congress, second session*. (2013). U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Loewus, L. (2017, Nov 29). How much planning and collaboration time are teachers getting? *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/how-much-planning-and-collaboration-time-are-teachers-getting/2017/11#:~:text=How%20Much%20Planning%20and%20Collaboration%20Time%20Are%20Teachers%20Getting%3F,-By%20Liana%20Loewus&text=Teachers%20are%20generally%20getting%2045,analysis%20of%20large%20school%20districts.>
- Luma System Methods*. (2023). Luma-Institute.com. Retrieved January 9, 2023. <https://www.luma-institute.com/about-luma/luma-system-explore-methods/>
- Merritt, E. (2016, Dec 1). Time for teacher learning, planning critical for school reform. *Kappan*. <https://kappanonline.org/time-teacher-learning-planning-critical-school-reform/>
- Next Education Workforce*. (2024). Arizona State University. Retrieved May 28, 2024. <https://workforce.education.asu.edu/>

- Ousmanou, Y. (2022, July). Continuity of learning innovations. *Harford County Public Schools*.
https://www.hcps.org/superintendent/docs/Continuity_of_Learning_Innovations_Advancements_from_the_COVID-19_Pandemic_HCPS_July_2022.pdf
- Peetz, C. (2024, Jan 23). The popularity of the 4-day school weeks, in charts. *Education Week*.
<https://www.edweek.org/leadership/the-popularity-of-4-day-school-weeks-in-charts/2024/01#:~:text=Four%2Dday%20weeks%20have%20been,states%20had%20adopted%20the%20schedule%20>.
- Ridgway, K. (2023, March 27). Elementary teacher planning time: strategic focus group report. *Harford County Public Schools*. <https://www.hcps.org/webfiles/WebFilesHandler.ashx?id=3949>
- Rose, Thorn, Bud*. (2023). Luma-Institute.com. Retrieved January 9, 2023. <https://www.luma-institute.com/rose-thorn-bud/>
- Strategic Plan*. (2017, June). Harford County Public Schools.
https://www.hcps.org/aboutus/docs/Strategic_Implementation_Plan.pdf.
- Vilson, J. (2015, Jan 29). Less is more: the value of a teacher's time. *Edutopia*.
<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/value-of-a-teachers-time-jose-vilson#:~:text=Teachers%20could%20become%20more%20effective,instruction%20and%20grading%20student%20work>.
- Visualize the Vote*. (2023). Luma-Institute.com. Retrieved January 9, 2023.
<https://www.luma-institute.com/visualize-the-vote/>