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The Absurd Structure of High School

I have 20 new students entering my classroom every hour. The frenzied pace is failing everyone.

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Consider this schedule: At 8 a.m. you arrive at work. Immediately you are busy with a quick problem needing to be solved. You sit and get to it, but only for about three minutes. You break your focus to stop and receive instruction for the next half hour, before getting to work on another task. There may be a bit of discussion, but you are on task and dedicated.

Just before 9 a.m., you stop again, move to a new office, and start a new task. Your previous hour was spent on accounting, applying math to a problem, then training in more advanced math, then more application. This next hour will be focused on writing. Again, you spend several minutes on a short orienting task, then listen to a lecture, then engage in practice and knowledge transfer. Just before the hour ends, you switch offices again and repeat the entire process, except now the focus is studying your company's history.

It's now 11 a.m. You break for a half-hour lunch, then go to your company's lab for an hour. You repeat the workflow process from this morning, but now you also must perform an experiment. As this hour ends, you again change rooms, change focus, change task, change environment, change peers.

Each of these hourlong periods leaves you with work to do outside the office: four or five math problems, 20 pages of reading, a paragraph to write, 10 new vocabulary words to memorize. Your workday technically ends at 3 p.m., but most days you have some kind of event after work.

You want to stay healthy, but you spend most days sitting the entire time. You walk fewer than 3,000 steps a day on average, so after work you may take up a sport—not a game, usually, but more practice and drill.

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You do all of this every day, Monday through Friday. On weekends you often have work that wasn't finished during the week. The managers who oversee your various hourly commitments don't really communicate with each other. Each treats their task as the number-one priority of your life—not merely for that hour, but for the day. Overlapping activity is ignored.

This absurd work schedule is high school. Though the business world would hardly expect adult employees to function in such an environment, this is the daily schedule for young people in America until they graduate (for many, this starts in middle school, so from around age 12 to 18).

The system's scheduling fails on every possible level. If the goal is productivity, the fractured nature of the tasks undermines efficient product. So much time is spent in transition that very little is accomplished before there is a demand to move on. If the goal is maximum content conveyed, then the system works marginally well, in that students are pretty much bombarded with detail throughout their school day. However, that breadth of content comes at the cost of depth of understanding. The fractured nature of the work, the short amount of time provided, and the speed of change all undermine learning beyond the superficial. It's shocking, really, that students learn as much as they do.

Teachers are just as constrained by the system as students. Every hour, 20 new people enter our classroom. We must present lessons that are repetitive and consistent, but also varied and engaging—high school students are human beings, after all. (Maybe.) Every week or two or three, we have a major piece of work from each student that demands extra attention. We do this six times a day—up to 180 people each day. We have an hour to prepare for the next day. Our day is often interrupted by one of the endless meetings we must attend. Any assessment or planning we couldn't finish during the day follows us home.

Imagine if businesses ran on this kind of system. Imagine if proposed changes were met with indifference or hostility.

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The biggest issue students and teachers face is time. In some schools, a teacher may have 80 or 90 students, but in my experience, the average is significantly higher—120 or more. It is simply impossible to monitor, to assess, to provide feedback, to really know each student. The march of faces and personalities is relentless, just as the march of demands and tasks is relentless for the student. Teachers have no time to teach and measure, to get to know their students, students also lack the time to learn and demonstrate, to get to know the subject.

The problem as I see it is that we are married to a system that has not been properly re-evaluated for 21st-century capabilities and capacities. The primary force behind a high school curriculum is the structure of the university: compartmentalized fields of knowledge further broken down into highly specialized and narrow branches.

At the university level, one spends most of the time studying a specific subject, though with a possible two-year exploration period at the start. The governing forces are choice and specialization. By the time college students reach their senior years, nearly all their classes concern their chosen majors, with a heavy emphasis both on practical application to a specific future and individual ambition. English majors study literature and engineering majors study engineering, both with an eye to a future when their specialized knowledge has deep professional application (ideally).

> Why should each student attend every class every day all year long?

However, the principles of the university structure are hauled down to the high school level without the governing purposes of real-world application that motivate the college curriculum. High school is still broken into various departments—history, literature, math, sciences, arts, etc.—but without much of the specialization that defines how those departments fit in the adult world and none of the choice that motivates its actors.

The result is a mess; individualized departments attempting to simultaneously provide a broad overview of every major field and a narrow foundation for future specialized study at the university level. And, structurally, we attempt to do this all at once. A little of everything every day for four years.

Why should each student attend every class every day all year long? The skills each student is building are not unique to any one subject. Writing, for example, is not merely an English subject. It's necessary in all classes. Ditto reading. Ditto math. The two core subjects of school, language and mathematics, are embedded in every other discipline. In fact, mastering the core skills is what defines the content and structure of a primary education. It's only in high school that these skill sets suddenly become subjects, while the other content breaks free into separate classes. Given limited time and an industrialized setting, the result is a scattershot, piecemeal, almost frenzied wreck. It also misses an essential component for deep mastery: extended, focused attention.

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The solution, to me anyway, seems almost too easy. Students should have two long classes each day for six to eight weeks. They should come to school in the morning and intensely study a single subject—ancient history, a few Shakespeare plays, cell biology, a specific math concept, and so on. In the afternoon, another subject for a few more hours. When the term ends, they move on to another subject.

While this solution does not address the problem of choice, it would allow teachers to work with each student on an individual basis more frequently.

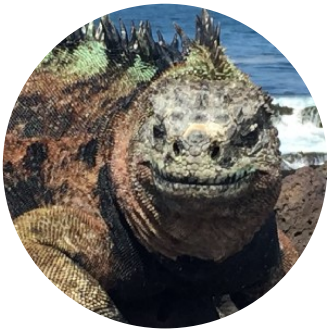
In my subject, English, the literature could be approached the way it's meant to be—focused, with time and attention—rather than broken up into tiny fragments over months, competing with all the other demands. Students could write for two hours, in class, and then share their essay, and then revise, all in one or two days. They could spend three hours reading a few chapters of a book while I, the teacher, would have the time and energy to meet individually with each student.

> The students would be undistracted by the pressure of all those other classes, all those other teachers, all those other subjects every day.

As the teacher, I could see every student's work, monitor each student simply by moving through the room, address each student who was struggling, and see—in a way nearly impossible in a 55-minute block—who and what was succeeding or failing.

A teacher who had a small group of students for six weeks for four or five hours a day would have the time to get to know them. The students would be undistracted by the pressure of all those other classes, all those other teachers, all those other subjects every day. School is structured for efficiency: the maximum number of students before the lowest number of experts each year. This would not change with a shifted schedule because teachers would see the same number of students each year, just in six- or eight-week blocks.

A student with one or two classes a day would be able to focus on a single task for an extended period of time. Excellence would not be fractured. Work would be manageable and focused. And if the actual working world is any guide, deep and effective learning would take place.



WRITTEN BY

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just another frustrated teacher

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