Let's Sit Together:
Exploring the Potential for Human Relations Education at Lunch

Jennifer Ng,
Holly Morsbach Sweeney,
& Melinda Mitchiner
University of Kansas

School lunch involves not only lunch itself but also the interactions of people gathered together in the lunch room at lunch time. Researchers who have studied this particular social space have characterized it as an important site of peer interaction, identity formation, and status differentiation. Because these processes are influenced by such things as race (Tatum, 2003), class (Eckert, 1989), gender and age (Eder, 1995), and other manifestations of culture (Milner, 2006), researchers have also emphasized that the resulting friendship circles or cliques in a cafeteria are not random. Instead, they are dynamic formations whose terms and processes of inclusion or exclusion determine group membership, order hierarchies of group power, and delineate relations within as well as between groups (Adler & Adler, 1995; Bishop, Bishop, Bishop, Gelbwasser, Green, Peterson, Rubinsztaj & Zuckerman, 2004; Kinney, 1993).

To counter the divisiveness and hurt that so often ensues from lunch time interactions, students attending more than 2,500 schools in the United States and abroad recently participated in the 12th annual Teaching Tolerance campaign to "Mix It Up at Lunch" (Severson, 2013). This event exemplifies a broad approach to multicultural education that Sleeter & Grant (2009) refer to as "human relations"—efforts that foster interactions between students who might not otherwise believe they have much in common in the hopes of thereby overcoming stereotypes and prejudice to instead promote empathy, respect, and a shared sense of humanity. In the case of students at Mix It Up schools, a featured aspect of their involvement is sitting in randomly assigned seating ar-

rangements and having lunch with classmates different from their usual lunchtime company for one day (Willoughby, 2011).

What might the potential of such an idea be on the social relations of a school if it were adopted as routine practice throughout the year? This is the central question we pursued at Bishop Seabury, a notable school where mixing it up is how they have always done lunch.

Studying Seabury: The School Context and Our Research Methods

Bishop Seabury Academy is an independent, college preparatory school located in Lawrence, Kansas, a Midwestern community of approximately 87,000 people. Established in 1997 with 32 students, six teachers, and one Headmaster, it now enrolls almost 180 students in grades 6-12 and has a staff of 28 teachers and administrators. Tuition for the school costs almost $12,500 per year, though Seabury is committed to an economically diverse student body and thus allocates 10 percent of its operating budget to providing financial assistance to students in need. Bishop Seabury also values racial and ethnic diversity, with almost a quarter of its students coming from minority backgrounds (www.seaburyacademy.org).

The immediate entrance into the school's main building is an open room lined with windows along its south wall known as "The Commons." From 12:30 to 1:10 each day, The Commons functions as the school's lunchroom, where students themselves arrange 25 round tables that seat 8 people each. On every table, students also place a rectangular Tupperware container with utensils inside, another container with salt and pepper shakers, and a plexiglas standing frame that displays the table number and the name of the designated staff member above it. This information helps students locate their particular seat assignments which are posted on a bulletin board every other Monday.

On Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, students eat lunch according to a randomly assigned seating arrangement that includes one adult member of the school staff. These mixed-grade combinations change every two weeks, a routine that continues throughout the year. On Wednesdays, students sit with their faculty advisors and advisory group, referred to in Latin as their "altera familia" or "other family." These advisories are also mixed-grade groups, though students' memberships in them remain constant from the time they enter Seabury to the time they graduate. Then, on Fridays, everyone gets to choose where—and with whom—they want to sit, and seniors have the option of leaving the campus entirely.

Bishop Seabury's approach to lunch made it an ideal setting for our

study. Not only were seating arrangements regularly mixed through the year, they included the entire student body and its adult staff. Because this structuring of lunch began with the school's inception, it also provided us an opportunity to consider how lunches have changed over time and how school leaders have continued supporting the practice. Indeed, as the Headmaster explained, relatively few modifications have been made, and they include now serving catered food in a buffet rather than family-style arrangement and using a computer program developed by a former student to generate the bi-weekly seating assignments instead of having a staff member create them manually. The recent addition of 6th grade to the previously 7th-12th grade school increased its enrollment by more than 10 percent and prompted practical questions of whether Seabury's lunches could continue being accommodated in its existing space. However, broad support from staff as well as students and the reconfiguration of tables in an expanded Commons area have ensured the continuation of this tradition into the foreseeable future.

Given our interest in exploring the social relations of lunch at Bishop Seabury, we purposefully designed our study to include the views of students as well as adult staff through two primary data collection methods. First, we conducted semi-structured, individual interviews each lasting approximately one hour with eight staff members knowledgeable about the school's lunch practices. During these interviews, we asked exploratory questions to understand the intended goals of the approach, staff members' experiences with respect to its implementation, and any related effects they may have observed. Respondents represented the varied roles of staff at Seabury, including the Headmaster, administrative support staff, classroom teachers, and individuals who serve in dual capacities as classroom teachers and extra-curricular program leaders.

Second, we conducted five focus groups with students, four of which were organized according to students' grade levels (6th, 7-8th, 9-10th, 11-12th) and one by students' backgrounds as international students in an ESL class. Our rationale for grouping students in this manner was because we believed perspectives might differ by how long students had attended Seabury and thus participated in the mixed-grade, assigned lunch seating approach. We also wanted to be sensitive to the possibility that certain students—6th graders and international students, in particular—might be more comfortable sharing their experiences in more homogeneous groups. Each focus group lasted approximately 50 minutes and included general questions to gauge students' views on how Seabury approaches lunch, hypothetical questions to elicit comparisons with other possible lunch practices, and reflective questions to consider the potential impact of their particular lunch experiences.

Concurrent with initial interviews and focus groups, we conducted participant observations of lunch at Bishop Seabury three times a week for one month. These observations provided us opportunities to enrich our understanding of lunch time routines, further detail examples of social interaction, revise study protocols as needed, and corroborate emerging conclusions across data sources. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed for later analyses which involved inductive coding within individual cases first and then comparing similarities and differences as well as frequency of mention across cases and data sources. We also attended to participants' metaphorical language or analogies-in-use as methods to refine resulting insights (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). In the sections that follow, we discuss what we learned about Bishop Seabury's rationale for its lunches as well as its impact on individuals at the school. We then highlight aspects of the approach that seemed important for its effectiveness at Seabury and conclude with implications for other schools to consider if they were also to adopt similar practices.

Saving Seats for Everyone: Why Do We Sit Together?

When asked to share their initial reactions to lunch at Bishop Seabury, students frequently used descriptors like "surprised," "confused," or "scared." Some anticipated the experience of mixed-age, assigned seating and sitting with adults would be "weird" while others thought it was an "interesting" idea and simply something "new" to try. As one student stated, "I thought [the school was] making a big deal out of something that wasn't." However, like all the students we spoke to, this student ultimately came to appreciate lunch at Seabury. He explained, it was more like eating dinner than lunch—something with bigger expectations, sitting down, and social time.

Indeed, the Seabury staff we interviewed did view lunch as a social time, and they sought to ensure as one teacher stated, that "in the long run, over time, every lunch [is] counting toward something." One of the more basic goals was to *promote certain standards of decorum*. This expectation was communicated through direct instruction, modeling, and gentle reminders as needed, and it was apparent as students collectively paused for daily prayer; stood to acknowledge the arrival of adult staff or guests at the table; asked for the salt and pepper to be passed rather than reaching across another person; and showed self-awareness about potentially inappropriate behavior such as playing with their food.

When asked to reflect upon any life lessons that might have resulted

from their experiences with lunch at Bishop Seabury, students referenced their developing social skills. A few sixth graders attributed their mindfulness about cleaning up after themselves to the fact that "certain grades have certain jobs for lunch" so teachers and janitors would not have to pick up after them. An upperclassman noted the impact of examples set amongst mixed-age peers and explained, "It makes you want to kind of act in an acceptable way." And several international students, a couple of whom shared that lunch in their home countries was simply not eaten at school, explained what they were learning about manners in the Seabury environment:

> Student 1: First thing they have to do is pray. Then we sit and start eating. You can't sit down before the prayer.
>
> Student 2: Also, you have to stand up when a teacher comes to your table.
>
> Other Students: To respect them…
>
> Student 1: Yeah, it has to do with respect.

The thoughtfulness of students who asked for permission to get a glass of water and inquired whether others wanted any as a matter of habit was yet another example a teacher offered. Consideration such as this, she said, "encourages very positive behavior and not because I'm going, 'You will ask them if they want anything.' No, it just springs organically from the whole environment."

A second rationale for Bishop Seabury's approach was that lunch could *foster a sense of community* in the school, especially through meaningful conversation. As the Headmaster recounted, "One of the things we tell [students is that their job at the table], when you eat, when you're with people…it is a place for discussion. You are doing two things with your mouth at once. It is a place to share ideas, to build community. [Having lunch] is not simply shoving food into your mouth." Becoming acquainted with peers as well as adult staff meant getting to know people as individuals rather than through superficially broad categories of difference like "teacher," "senior," "international student," or "newbie." One staff person commented, "At that lunch table, you are just someone having lunch with someone else." Another staff person emphasized the distinct context of lunch being important, too. She stated, "We are outside the classroom, and we are interacting as people. People that are just at different stages of our lives."

Students also described enjoying conversations that exposed them to new ideas or helped them connect to others with mutual interests in a process of getting to know their peers and their teachers. One student

memorably called the social time afforded by lunch a chance to have a "complete conversation" threading through what might have started during the day's school-wide "morning meeting," advisory group, class, or some other point. As one teacher acknowledged, lunches themselves were only opportunities for engagement, and students seemed to recognize the quality of resulting exchanges depended upon the participation of all individuals. "Good" tables were characterized as having adult leaders who set a tone for the group's involvement by asking open-ended and interesting questions. "Bad" tables, which were fortunately a "rare occasion" according to upperclassmen, were those where conversation seemed awkward, contrived, or almost non-existent. In these instances, many students indicated their willingness to step up and test their conversational abilities, and one sixth grader ventured, "It's kind of like, don't be shy. That's what it kind of teaches us."

Lunches were described as perhaps the most visible sign of community at the school, and ensuring everyone's belonging to this community meant *reinforcing inclusiveness* as a third objective. One staff member described the use of mixed-age assigned seating at lunch as a "different, very creative, and very in tune with an adolescents' psyche" way to counter their seemingly inevitable tendencies toward cliquish behavior. Another teacher noted, too, the reputation of teachers' lounges during lunch time as places where adults could isolate themselves from students to complain or be catty amongst their colleagues. Yet, Seabury's structured lunches required the participation of adults and thereby interrupted such inclinations. She insisted, "I don't talk about my students. If I have an issue with a student, I'll just go and speak to the student candidly, you know? I don't gossip about my students."

Consistent with popular media portrayals and likely the life experiences of many people, one teacher recalled her own high school lunch period as being fraught with anxiety. She described, "It was a stressful time of my day. I was worried, who would sit with me? Would my friends be there? Or, would I be, you know, carrying my tray hoping someone was going to let me sit at their table?" In contrast, the belief underlying Seabury's explicit insistence upon inclusiveness was voiced by its Headmaster, "It's the separation that breeds disrespect, lack of empathy." The resulting experience of lunch, then, was captured by one student who said:

> You don't have to worry about, 'Oh my gosh, my friend is sitting over here. I'm going to sit over there.' And if someone wants to sit with you, at my old school my friends would be like, 'I'll sit with you, but there are no seats left.' So, they would feel sad, they would feel bad. They would feel discluded, and this way no one feels discluded.

Across staff and student respondents alike, there was clarity expressed about the purposes of Seabury's approach to lunch and support for its implementation. Teachers referred to their commitment in terms of having "drunk the Kool-Aid" or being "all in," and the Headmaster concluded, "I am absolutely certain that this is the best way I can think of right now to have lunches." The only thing that could affect this conviction, he indicated, was:

> If you talk to students and you hear, 'Well, I look forward to Fridays [and just choosing who I sit with]. And, [teachers] say we [engage everyone], but we don't really do it. I don't understand why we do it, and there are always side conversations. The teachers at my table generally don't take any interest.' If I heard that, I wouldn't change lunches, I would start talking to the kids…

To the school's credit, what we heard from students was generally quite positive and included feelings of gratitude for "teachers [who] include you so much" and have made lunch "how it should be." In the section that follows, we elaborate upon what insights might be gleaned from Bishop Seabury's approach to lunch, paying particular attention to features we believe contributed to its effective implementation. While not generalizable across different school settings in a strict, statistical sense, such explication can advance the efforts of interested individuals seeking to determine the transferability of certain ideas from Seabury to their own, local school context (Moss, Phillips, Erickson, Floden, Lather & Schneider, 2009). In essence, we hope to contribute to what Battistich, Solomon, Watson & Schaps call "a useful framework for considering action under particular circumstances" (1997, p. 150).

The Company We Want to Keep: What Makes This Work?

As discussed earlier, educational researchers have recognized the social significance of lunch, and the campaign to Mix It Up has grown in popularity with educational practitioners. Yet, there is little published research about such efforts or their impact. This, we believe, is an important oversight as studies have shown feelings of belonging (Goodenow & Grady, 1993) to caring school communities (Basttistich et. al, 1997) have positive academic as well as social effects. In one of the few studies available, Kindzierski, Leavitt-Noble, Dutt-Doner, Marable, and Wallace (2013) found third graders who participated at two different elementary schools felt uncomfortable and reported little to no connection with their randomly assigned classmates after the day's experience of mixed lunch. Though the majority of these students thought the activity was "okay" or

even said they "liked it," they also described "barely talking" or "talking about nothing really." Overwhelmingly, they preferred that things "stay the way they are" at their schools.

Students we spoke to at Bishop Seabury also expressed wanting things to stay the same at their school, though for them this meant continuing the practice of eating lunch with randomly assigned peers and teachers three days a week, having another day for sitting with their mixed-age advisory groups, and spending the last with their choice of company. The school's lunch practices were readily associated with its "safe," "welcoming," and "family"-like environment. And, when asked hypothetically for their reactions to an announcement that students would now be able to choose who they wanted to sit with every day just as students in other schools did, one student replied, "I think if that were to happen, the meek and timid people who don't have anyone to sit with at lunch time would form an impromptu revolution on the school and on the Headmaster's office to demand normal lunches back."

Students on the whole acknowledged the purposeful design of lunches and appreciated how the school's intended goals were not just suggestions but were actually *normalized through formal policies and procedures*. One student in the 7th-8th grade focus group stated, "We are forced into the best way to meet people. We can meet teachers without other kids thinking you are weird for wanting to talk to them or meet them. You can do this at lunch." An international student added, "For me, I not feel comfortable to make opportunity by myself to make friends or to get familiar with other people so the assignment table is like a way to force me to make friends with others. It is a good opportunity for me."

Staff at Seabury recognized the importance of continually acting to counteract certain cliquish or exclusionary behaviors they believed would not otherwise be eliminated. And, when they discussed the intended goals of lunch, lunch served as just one of several ways the school worked to realize its objectives. This was evident in the Headmaster's reply when asked about what difference he thought lunches might have made on individual students: "I tend to think of it as a composite between altera familia in the morning, morning meeting, and lunch. I tend to see it grouped together, so maybe I'm talking about more than just lunch…" Arguably, the close *integration of multiple efforts* contributed to Seabury's effectiveness, making lunches so vital as to be synonymous with the school itself. As one student in the 9th-10th grade focus group reflected, "You don't realize in 7th grade, but those lunches are kind of important. They're like, Seabury. And I'd be upset if we didn't do them anymore." Another teacher voiced similar sentiments and said, "[Lunches] support

the overall picture of the school." She continued, "Why would we [get rid of our lunches]? That is what Seabury is."

In contrast to the one-day experience of students seated randomly at participating Mix It Up schools, Bishop Seabury's approach continued throughout the year. Its structure was not premised entirely upon either free choice or assigned seating but instead seemed to satisfy students and staff with a *balance of variety and sameness*. Students found the idea of doing any one thing—sitting in assigned seats, with advisory groups, or choosing their placement—potentially boring, even if it might at first sound appealing. One student analogized, "It's like donuts. You eat one, and it is good. But you eat too many, it is bad." And an international who appreciated the variable routine likened it to a "rhythm" through the week.

Differentiating between monotony and "a good sameness" resulting from Seabury's consistent lunch expectations and routines was important, a staff member insisted, as the stability was intended to safeguard against students feeling fear, concern, or tension. Another advantage of the varied lunch formats was that it afforded members of the school opportunities for comparison through contrasting experiences. This was already the case as many staff and students recalled the dynamics of previous schools where they had attended or worked. Reflection upon differences generally seemed to heighten students' appreciation, as illustrated by one student's sentiment: "I like that [Fridays] only happen once a week. It makes them more special. You look forward to them. …It's nice to have it once a week and like just have that freedom, but I don't think I'd like it or it would be the same if we had it like that every day."

Perhaps related to the benefit of contrasting experiences, students also expressed how lunches prompted them to *reconceive the meaning of "choice."* Interestingly, these more nuanced understandings of choice—as something you did not know you wanted or as something you needed to learn you liked and then would have freely chosen—reinforced the merits of Seabury's approach. One student explained, "[If I had the chance], I would tell [my parents and teachers] how cool it is to sit with who I want…kind of who I want even if I didn't choose. You end up kind of wanting to sit with the people you end up sitting with." The idea of choice was also reframed by the Headmaster as a privilege rather than an entitlement so that if on Fridays students formed groups that excluded certain individuals, "We go back to doing the other way because there is a responsibility on all levels." When this happened once amongst students in the 6th grade, they were temporarily not allowed to choose their seats again and sat together as a single group of 6th graders instead. Readings on community and conversations about, "'What hap-

pened? Why did it happen? Who's excluded? Why did you do this? How did it make them feel? Have you ever been excluded? What's going on?' became part of the text of the class," according to the Headmaster.

Recognition of *student development was central to the process of learning* about decorum, community, and inclusiveness at Seabury. The staff members we interviewed gave numerous examples of communicating expectations, providing direct instruction, and offering positive reinforcement as well as corrective feedback when needed. They also assumed students would show initiative as they became more confident, exemplify desired conduct in mixed-age interactions, and demonstrate leadership as opportunities arose. Students described their growth over time in congruent terms, with select comments such as:

> I think 6th graders are really shy for about a week and don't really want to talk to anybody, but I think the older kids try to include you. I think it just took us awhile. (6th grade focus group)

> Teachers kind of lead…but the students help to set an example for the younger kids. Last year, I did not know what to do at lunch, but the students would start talking and look at you, and you thought, I better start talking or I will look like an idiot. So, it is like helping out your friends to know how to do this. (7th-8th grade focus group)

> Like when you're a 6th grader, if you don't have to talk to a senior you're probably not going to but then when it's like thrust upon you, not in a bad way, but like you're going to sit with a senior and a bunch of other grades, they are going to ask you questions and they are going to talk to you. I think it helps, like, 6th graders and 7th graders become more comfortable around older kids in general. (9th-10th grade focus group)

And,

> I think [mixed lunches] benefit international students more than other students because they're afraid to speak English and are more shy. So, it's more success for international students. (International student focus group)

Upperclassmen had the longest range perspective, recounting:

> Student 1: After you get older, you realize how helpful [lunch] was.
>
> Student 2: I don't think we really reflect every day on what lunch is doing.
>
> Student 3: Yeah, this is the first time we've really thought about it….
>
> Student 4: Before now, I just thought about it as eating lunch with a bunch of people, but now looking back on it, I realize that there was a reason. (11th-12 grade focus group)

Students were able to describe their growth over time and with continued interaction, showing a maturity of sorts that one teacher related in the following way:

> We push it, we push it, we push it. We control it, control it, control it. But once you get to be a certain age, everything that we've been trying to tell you and to teach you, you go, 'Okay. That's a sweater I'll put on for myself. You've shown me that sweater. You've made me wear that sweater. And now I realize that's a good sweater. Now I'm going to wear it.

A few students suggested Seabury's approach to lunch was something they could imagine sustaining on their own if ever the formal protocols were changed and every day became a free-choice Friday. Tentatively, one student in the 7th-8th grade focus group said, "I might choose to sit with someone I did not know, but maybe not with someone three years older than me." Another asserted more confidently, "I would sit with someone I did not know and had not sat with during assigned seating during the year. Sure, why not?" And to improve the existing system, this same student inquired,

> Last year you could ask to sit with someone you had not sat with yet by the end of the year, and it would happen because [a person] organized and sorted the names. But this year, the assignments are sorted by a [computer] program, so you can't ask to sit with a teacher you haven't sat with. …Can you please make this happen?

Conclusion

We selected Bishop Seabury to be the site of our study because of its particular approach to lunch, and through our exploration we found it to be an exceptional place both in terms of it being quite excellent and in terms of it being quite rare. If other schools sought to implement similar school-wide practices for lunch, they might struggle to find such unity of vision and coordinated support from administrators, teachers, students, and the surrounding community (see Severson, 2012, for example). And given the sheer size of student enrollments or departmentalization and bureaucratization in some schools, the practical reality of Seabury's approach might seem inconceivable (Battistich et. al, 1997). Nevertheless, we challenge educators to first evaluate whether actively promoting interactions between social groups in their school is worthwhile. And then, we hope interested parties will convene to consider how this might be accomplished through lunches or any other aspect of their particular context. Because the social dynamics of schools are so often the result of default, this type of purposeful reflection and concerted effort would be a valuable—and necessary—start.

The affirming and readily adaptable nature of human relations approaches like Seabury's lunches make it popular amongst educators committed to multicultural education (Sleeter & Grant, 2009). For their seeming ease of use, however, initiatives can be problematic when hastily recommended on the basis of good intentions but without adequate training, time for implementation, and opportunities for sustained and well-facilitated discussion (Pate, 1981). Educators should recognize, too, that overt indications of everyone "getting along" can hide existing conflicts that have been silenced in environments not conducive to their safe acknowledgment. And even the most effective efforts to improve human relations may still fall short of addressing outcomes indicative of a socially just and wholly affirming institution—as in the case of a school where students interact quite harmoniously but where academic disparities persist predictably across groups by race, gender, and class, or in the case of a school where acceptance is largely assimilative and premised upon minimizing or disregarding differences that may be real, meaningful, and important to explore.

Efforts to foster human relations have great potential, and Seabury's structured lunches provide an illustration of what can be realized. Cultivating one's graciousness, empathy, and common bond with others is a critical foundation for education. It is also a worthy endeavor as we prepare future citizens to live together in the world. We conclude with appreciation for Bishop Seabury's work and also for the last lines of a poem referenced during our interview with the school Headmaster. As a teacher of ethics, his recollection of Margaret Atwood's (1987, p. 53) words seemed a fitting connection to our study, and they resonate with us still:

All bread must be broken
So it can be shared. Together
We eat this earth.

Note

The authors would like to thank the students and staff of Bishop Seabury Academy for their support and participation in this study. Inquiries about the school can be directed to its Headmaster, Dr. Don Schawang, at 785-832-1717. The authors also wish to acknowledge the assistance of Abbie Wenger and Allen Schaidle with transcriptions related to this research.

References

Adler, P. A., & Adler, P. (1995). Dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in preadolescent cliques. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 58*(3), 145-162.

Atwood, M. (1987). *Selected poems II: 1976-1986*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Battistich, V., Solomon, D., Watson, M. & Schaps, E. (1997). Caring school communities. *Educational Psychologist, 32*(3), 137-151.

Bishop, J. H., Bishop, M., Bishop, M., Gelbwasser, L., Green, S., Peterson, E., Rubinsztaj, A. & Zuckerman, A. (2004). Why we harass nerds and freaks: A formal theory of student culture norms. *Journal of School Health, 7*(7), 235-251.

Eckert, P. (1989). *Jocks and burnouts: Social categories and identity in the high school*. NewYork: Teachers College Press.

Eder, D. (1995). *School talk: Gender and adolescent culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Goodenow, C., & Grady, K. E. (1993). The relationship of school belonging and friends' values to academic motivation among urban adolescent students. *Journal of Experimental Education, 62*(1), 60-71.

Kindzierski, C. M., Leavitt-Noble, K., Dutt-Doner, K., Marable, M. A. & Wallace, N. (2013). Teaching tolerance with Mix It Up! Student reactions to an unusual lunch period. *Childhood Education, 89*(1), 15-18.

Kinney, D. A. (1993). From nerds to normal: The recovery of identity among adolescents from middle school to high school. *Sociology of Education, 66*(1), 21-40.

Milner, M. (2006). *Freaks, geeks, and cool kids*. New York: Routledge Press.

Moss, P. A., Phillips, D. C., Erickson, F. D., Floden, R. E., Lather, P. A. & Schneider, B. L. (2009). Learning from our differences: A dialogue across perspectives on quality in education research. *Educational Researcher, 38*(7), 501-517.

Pate, G. S. (1981). Research on prejudice reduction. *Educational Leadership, 38*(4), 288-291

Ryan, G. W., & Bernard, H. R. (2003). Techniques to identify themes. *Field Methods, 15*(1), 85-109.

Severson, K. (2012, October 14). Christian group finds gay agenda in anti-bullying day. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com

Sleeter, C. E. & Grant, C. A. (2009). *Making choices for multicultural education: Five approaches to race, class, and gender*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Tatum, B. D. (2003). *Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?* New York: Basic Books.

Willoughby, B. (Oct. 20, 2011). *Mix it up at lunch: So what's next?* Retrieved from http://www.tolerance.org/blog/mix-it-lunch-so-what-s-next

Making Time for Well-Being

How to use the school schedule to support greater connection and balance.

Sarah Miles, Denise Pope, Jennifer Curry Villeneuve, and Samantha T. Selby

ALICE MOLLON / IKON IMAGES

Henry David Thoreau once said, "It is not enough to be busy. . . . The question is what are we busy about?" As Thoreau reminds us, how we spend our time is a function of our values—and how time is allocated during the school day reflects what is important to the community, intentionally or unintentionally.

In the past two years, schools have faced the herculean task of attending to students' physical and mental well-being while attempting to engage them in meaningful learning. Educators have added vital resources and tools for students and school staff, such as social-emotional learning programs, increased counseling and clinical support, and incorporating coping strategies like meditation and breathwork into the school day.

These resources and tools can be very powerful for many individuals in building and helping them maintain their sense of

well-being. However, an important aspect of improving and sustaining the well-being of an entire school community is also to make changes at the system level. In times of chaos and uncertainty, people crave stability and security. The use of time in school has the potential to shape the quality and the quantity of the experiences students, staff, and families have each day with each other and individually.

What Do We Need for Well-Being?

If we turn to self-determination theory to help us understand how to support positive physical and mental health for people of all ages, life experiences, cultures, and backgrounds, we can see that human beings have a universal need for autonomy, competency, and relatedness. People are more likely to feel a sense of well-being when they can make decisions that are aligned with their interests, feel a sense of mastery and purpose, and are connected to others (Chirkov et al., 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Over the past 15 years, we at Challenge Success, a nonprofit school reform organization affiliated with Stanford University's Graduate School of Education, have conducted student, faculty and staff, and parent surveys with school communities to dig deeper into well-being and engagement in schools. Through these surveys, we glean important insights into the areas of well-being that may be working well for students and staff, as well as those that may need to be strengthened. We share our analyses with school teams and discuss the implications of the findings on school practices and policies.

Findings from our 2021–22 school year surveys, revealing the effects of pandemic-related disruptions on students, show a need for schools to make changes in areas specifically related to autonomy, competency, and relatedness. In our work with schools, we share school-specific data similar to that in Figure 1 to inform our discussions with school leaders about the importance of supporting student and staff connection, engagement, and autonomy. In our experience, when students and staff do not feel like they can be themselves at school or do not have a trusted person to turn to when they have a problem, it suggests educators need to increase focus on school belonging and connection. When students are not engaged with their classes or feel like their learning focuses more on performance and less on improvement and understanding, and when teachers report fewer opportunities to connect learning to the real world, this represents a potential problem with overload and lack of time to promote mastery. And when students and staff feel like they are not given ample opportunities for voice, choice, and decision-making in schools, this points to a need to increase autonomy and agency.

In times of chaos and uncertainty, people crave stability and security.

The Schedule: Reflecting What's Important

While there are many levers in a school system that impact student and staff well-being, the school schedule impacts *all* stakeholders at the school on a daily basis, making it an essential component in addressing the well-being of the school community.

When we talk about the "school schedule," we are referring to multiple levels of time spent during the school day. First, there is the schedule that occurs between the start of the school day in the morning and the end of the school day, including after-school activities and meetings. Then there is the cadence of the school year—the start and end, when breaks and exams occur, as well as other considerations about the use of time. Though some aspects of the school schedule may not be within a school's control, the design of any schedule is ultimately a reflection of the school community's values and priorities. Opportunities abound to restructure big and small increments of time in schools so the schedule aligns more appropriately with educators' goals to create healthier youth and adults.

FIGURE 1. Sample Challenge Success Survey of Student and Teacher Experiences

Students 21,799 high school students 13,346 middle school students	**School Staff** 1,962 faculty and staff
CONNECTION & BELONGING	
66% of high school and 68% of middle school students feel they have an adult to go to at school if they have a personal problem.	84% of school staff have a colleague to go to if they have a personal problem.
32% of high school students and 29% of middle school students do not feel like they can be themselves at school.	13% of school staff do not feel like they can be themselves at school all or most of the time.
ENGAGEMENT & MASTERY	
High school students: 12% disengaged; 54% doing school (doing the work but not finding it enjoyable or meaningful); 10% fully engaged Middle school students: 6% disengaged; 35% doing school; 23% fully engaged	32% of teachers report that they never coordinate with their colleagues to ensure deadlines for major projects or assessments are spread out. 51% of teachers have provided students opportunities to connect their learning to their experiences outside of the classroom at least twice a month.
60% of high school students report that most or all of their classes focus on improvement. 59% of high school students report that in most or all classes the main goal is understanding the material.	79% of school staff often/always enjoy their job. 78% of school staff often/always find their job interesting. 80% of school staff often/always find their job meaningful.
AUTONOMY & AGENCY	
15% of students participate in decision making on curriculum at least 2–4 times/year.* 30% of students participate in decision making on school policies at least 2–4 times/year.* *data collected from faculty/staff on student behavior	65% of staff participate in decision making on curriculum at least 2–4 times/year. 48% of staff participate in decision making on school policies at least 2–4 times/year. 23% of teachers report that they have never provided opportunities for students to choose topics or skills to focus on in class and 22% of teachers do this at least twice a month.

Source: Challenge Success, 2022: https://challengesuccess.org/take-a-survey/

So how can schools use the school schedule to deepen connections, promote greater autonomy, and allow for more experiences of mastery and deep engagement? The examples we share below come directly from our work at Challenge Success with middle and high schools during this challenging year.

Using School Time to Deepen Connections

The organization of time in the school schedule can facilitate or impede connections between and among the school staff and students. Here are some ways we have seen schools use time to deepen connections and foster greater belonging:

■ *Lunch periods*. Today, not all schools have a designated lunch period, while many that do don't allow sufficient time or protect it as necessary down time. Ensuring that students and adults alike have a specific time for lunch allows everyone to take a break, slow down, see friends, and "break bread" together. It places a value on stopping to fuel your body and allows for more peer-to-peer, and student-to-faculty connection.

■ *Time for advisory*. High-quality advisory programs, where small groups of students meet regularly with an adult advisor, can foster students' need to feel known. They can be "safe spaces" for students to share struggles and support each other. Typically, the most effective advisory programs follow either a formal or informal curriculum plan that includes sample lesson ideas and intended outcomes, as well as some professional training or a guidebook for all advisors prior to the start of the school year on how best to support students' well-being. Advisory can meet daily or weekly, but the bell schedule should allow ample time (between 20 and 60 minutes, depending on frequency) to ensure meaningful interaction. Some schools have converted the "old" homeroom concept into effective advisory time, but it needs to be longer than the typical 10-minute homeroom that is mostly used to take attendance or listen to announcements.

Well-being in school doesn't just happen; it has to be made a priority.

■ *Tutorial or office hours*. Many schools offer a tutorial or study hall period during the day to allow greater access to teachers and other supports.

Well-Being in Practice

After noticing how few students interacted at lunch or even took breaks during the day, one Challenge Success high school changed its bell schedule to allow for students to share a common lunch period with a diverse mix of their peers. Before this change, students had no formal lunch time—they just squeezed in lunch whenever they had a free period (and some of them didn't have one!). A common lunch period promoted a stronger sense of belonging and connection, allowed students time to eat with their friends, and created space for planned activities at lunch that attracted a much higher percentage of students. As the principal shared in one of our surveys:

> We didn't have a lot of student culture [building] during lunchtime. In fact, it was a little bit of a ghost town. [The change in schedule] forced them to use those minutes for lunchtime to just relax and to be with their friends, rather than continue their day and do their homework. It helped our culture quite a bit because now we have student activities at lunchtime.

In another schedule change, schools conducted "connection audits" in which they matched staff to students with whom they already had a strong relationship. These connection matrices often revealed which students might be in danger of falling through the cracks. Schools used advisory time to ensure these students could have more frequent and consistent interactions with a caring adult.

Time for Mastery and Engagement

Students and adults need time during the school day to focus, to practice what they have learned, and to reflect. When they have short class periods with little time between classes, they are less likely to experience multiple modalities of teaching and learning, ask questions, or find time to reflect on their learning. As a result, their sense of mastery and academic engagement may suffer.

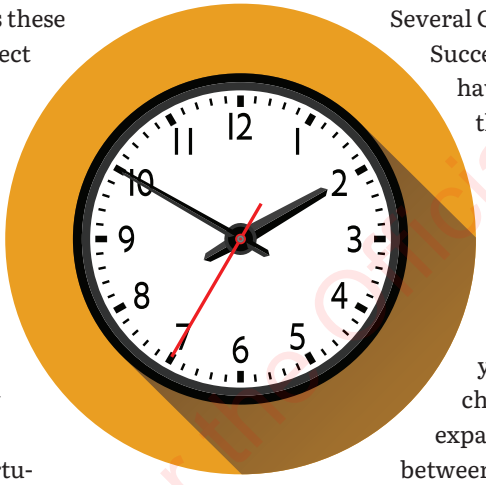
Some ways schools might find time to give students these opportunities to reflect and solidify their learning include:

■ *Longer class periods*. Longer periods allow for varied modalities of instruction and learning, such as individual work or group time. Mastery learning requires reflection and opportunities for questions. Typical class periods often deprioritize these aspects.

■ *More time between classes*. It is exhausting to switch gears from one topic and group dynamic to another. Schools can incorporate adequate time for students and teachers to make those transitions and slow down the pace of the day.

■ *Test and project calendars*. Students often complain that they are "slammed" with tests and due dates on certain days or weeks. A calendar for major assignments and assessments in each course can reduce overload and emphasize mastery by allowing sufficient time for students to study and prepare.

■ *Later school start time*. Later start times for school account for adolescents' circadian rhythms and allow them to experience morning learning while in a more awake state. This is also a good reason to alternate which classes students attend first period and to eliminate a "zero" period, a class which is offered before the start of the school day.



Well-Being in Practice

Several Challenge Success schools have noted that the pace of their school day was contributing to student and staff stress. They made simple yet significant changes by expanding the time between classes known as the passing period. Some schools lengthen passing time from 5 minutes to 8 or 10, while others try to reduce back-to-back classes by incorporating breaks, lunchtime, or advisory in between, which can reduce the amount of passing time needed in the school day. While it's admittedly complicated to try to find any extra time in an already-packed academic schedule, these changes decrease the "hustle and bustle" of the day, decrease disciplinary issues in hallways, and increase instructional time because students and teachers are more settled when class begins.

As one principal shared, "As minor a tweak as [having longer passing periods] seemed to be at the time, it has changed just how our kids feel and act on campus." Another said:

> We had a two-minute passing period. Kids would burst out the doors, they would run to their next class. There wasn't time to use the restroom or to get a drink of water or say hi to their friends. It was just, *move!* And even us, as the adults, were like, "Come on, you guys, you can make it." [When we extended the passing period] we talked to the students and said, "We're doing this so that you have less stress and [more] time to do what you need to do. You have time to breathe between classes and make that cognitive shift, maybe from science to history." Everybody was able to really de-stress. We had a lot less tardies, not surprisingly.

Promoting Agency and Autonomy

When students and faculty can control how they use their time and have opportunities to make decisions and choices aligned with their needs and interests, they are more likely to thrive. Healthier schedules prioritize choice in courses whenever possible and time for extracurricular activities without trading off student and staff sleep. Students and staff value free time during the day where they can choose how best to spend it.

Some elements of the school schedule where educators might better promote agency and autonomy include:

■ *Electives*. Electives give both students and teachers the freedom to choose to take or teach what they are interested in and enjoy doing.

■ *Extracurriculars*. Many students participate in extracurricular activities

EUROVECTOR / SHUTTERSTOCK

primarily for intrinsic reasons, and participating in extracurriculars can be linked to well-being. However, we do know that "too much of a good thing" is a real possibility. It is important that practices and meetings are not occurring late into the night or early in the morning.

■ *Flexible time*. Free periods allow students and staff the ability to prioritize meaningful tasks without the need to wait until after school hours to get homework, grading, or prep work done. Some schools require students to physically be in a classroom during flex times to have them count toward instructional minutes; other schools find ways to account for instructional minutes via longer course periods and electives, thereby allowing kids to spend flex time wherever they want.

■ *Weekends and breaks*. Rest and recovery are essential parts of learning. No-homework weekends or breaks, as well as scheduling exams before breaks (as opposed to after) are examples of practices that emphasize rest and recovery.

Well-Being in Practice

Another change students and parents report appreciating the most are homework-free holidays or weekends. These schoolwide policies communicate support for what we call PDF: playtime, downtime, and family time.

As this middle school principal shared, a little goes a long way:

> We began exploring the concept of homework-free nights as recommended by Challenge Success. We tried several last spring, and you would have thought that we were handing out gold candy bars. Parents and students that are hard to impress were like, "This is genius!" That's been a huge game-changer for us and an easy win, and the students felt heard.

Another school district recognized the need for students and families to have a break over holidays. School leaders sent the following message to emphasize why they were promoting the break from homework:

> Our high school faculty have made a commitment to support well-being. We will not be assigning homework this year for Thanksgiving, winter, and spring holidays. The hope is that students can take this opportunity to spend time with their families, work on hobbies, read a book for pleasure, and/or finalize college applications. We are very excited about this proactive approach to reduce student stress and workload. Enjoy your time!

A Key Lever for Well-Being

Well-being in school doesn't just happen; it has to be made a priority. How we use time in schools can be a key lever to promote whole-school-community well-being—particularly at this moment of heightened chaos and uncertainty. The schools we work with have found success with both large and small changes to their school schedules to emphasize well-being for everyone. Promoting ample time to build strong connections, allowing for meaningful work, and increasing student and teacher agency and choice is all time well spent.

Reflect & Discuss

Does your school's schedule reflect well-being as a priority? Why or why not?

How does time affect your own well-being—either positively or negatively?

Do any of the schedule changes the authors mention seem like a doable option for your school? Which might be most effective in your setting?

References

Chirkov, V., Ryan, R. M., Kim, Y., & Kaplan, U. (2003). Differentiating autonomy from individualism and independence: A self-determination theory perspective on internalization of cultural orientations and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(1), 97–110.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2001). To be happy or to be self-fulfilled: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 141–166.

Sarah Miles is a former 5th grade teacher and social worker and is now the director of research for Challenge Success. **Denise Pope** is a senior lecturer at the Stanford University Graduate School of Education and the author of several books, including *Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students* (Yale University Press, 2001) and coauthor of *Overloaded and Underprepared: Strategies for Stronger Schools and Healthy, Successful Kids* (Jossey-Bass, 2015). **Jennifer Curry Villeneuve** is a senior research and evaluation associate with Challenge Success. **Samantha T. Selby** is a research associate with Challenge Success.