

# About Time: Master Scheduling and Equity

May 2021

## Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the deep inequities that exist in U.S. school systems. Issues such as access to personal technology devices, stable broadband, reliable childcare, and meals have revealed differences in how well school systems serve students. The pandemic has also revealed the significance of one crucial element that greatly impacts schools systems' ability to equitably serve students: master scheduling.

Although deeply engrained in the rhythms of the school day, master scheduling often goes unseen even though decisions about how to organize people, time, and resources impact students' opportunities to access challenging coursework, teachers that can best meet their learning needs, and more diverse classrooms.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, districts across the country have used their schedules more flexibly and strategically. The sudden shift to remote learning prompted some schools and districts to shake loose long-held assumptions about the structure of the school day and the scheduling process. These schools and districts designed schedules that allocated scarce resources according to need rather than privilege and dismantled traditional schedules in favor of student-centered ones.

In the report, "[About Time: Master Scheduling and Equity](#)," the [Center for Public Research and Leadership](#) (CPRL) at Columbia University draws on the experiences of 33 principals, schedulers, and other system leaders to establish a case for transforming master scheduling from a purely technical task to a strategic one that places the student at the heart of the school day. The report culminates with The Master Scheduling Equity

Framework, which describes a process for strategic, equity-focused master scheduling. Key ideas include:

### 1. As a purely technical task, master scheduling widens inequity by masking the true weight of scheduling decisions

The complex nature of master schedules means it is easy to get lost in the details—such as managing instructional minutes, fulfilling teacher preferences, and troubleshooting technology—and overlook the impact of these details on student learning.

When treated only as a technical task, master scheduling standardizes inequities by creating barriers to opportunities. For example, in a technical approach to master scheduling, courses may be offered that meet high school graduation requirements, but they may not be the classes that prepare students for college or other postsecondary options. Too often, students who identify as Black and Latino, are experiencing poverty, have disabilities, or are multilingual learners, among other marginalized groups, are overly affected by these technical decisions.

## 2. As part of a strategic effort, master scheduling addresses inequities by expanding opportunities for students

Moving away from a technical approach to master scheduling presents an extraordinary chance to expand students' access to opportunities, especially for marginalized students. Despite its complexity, the school and district leaders, and schedulers reflected in the report work on collaborative teams to reimagine master scheduling as a strategy for increasing equitable access to opportunities provided by schools.

CPRL found that a strategic approach to scheduling allows schools and districts to:

- arrange time, resources, and people to maximize student learning and experience
- match students with best-fit educators
- give teachers adequate time to collaborate and refine their practice
- provide more equitable access to rigorous and rich coursework
- improve attendance, learning, and graduation rates

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“The master schedule is how you drive reform in a school. Although people tend to think about it as a technical process, it really is the leadership process of the school.”

—Deputy Superintendent

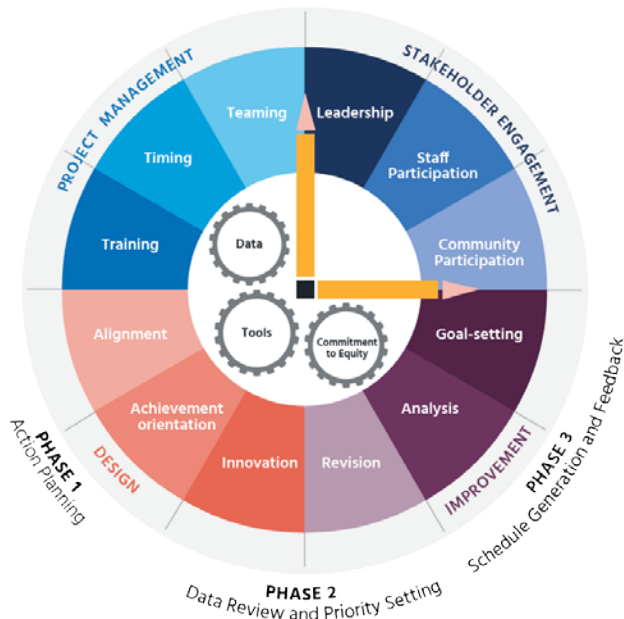
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## 3. The Master Scheduling Equity Framework transforms master scheduling from a technical task to a strategy for promoting equity

The Master Scheduling Equity Framework summarizes the lessons learned from system leaders and programmers who design schedules. It names three enabling conditions that allow educators, schools, and districts to shift from technical scheduling to strategic scheduling: (1) an explicit commitment to equity, (2) access to disaggregated data, and (3) tools that allow system leaders to efficiently monitor the impact of master scheduling and act on their commitment to equity.

Strategic scheduling comprises four domains of work: (1) project management, (2) stakeholder engagement, (3) improvement, and (4) design. Collectively, these domains bring together the right people and resources at the right time to manage the scheduling process and pursue equity-oriented goals; secure the broad participation of stakeholders through transparent and open communication; sustain a responsive and student-centered approach to structuring the learning environment; and enable regular and diligent review and improvement of the schedule.

### Figure 1. Master Scheduling Equity Framework



Addressing the inequities that scheduling can create will require schools to abandon the purely technical approach to scheduling and adopt a more strategic one, dedicated to maximizing student access to opportunity and reducing disparities in outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic has opened up even more opportunity for schools to take this leap, and transform their structures to better align with visions of equity and excellence.

## Additional Resources

In addition to the report, “About Time” includes a set of resources to help leaders, programmers, schedulers, and their communities think about master scheduling as an equity strategy.

- [About Time: Master Scheduling and Equity, the complete report with appendices](#)
- [Appendix A: Landscape Analysis of Scheduling Tools and Software](#)
- [Appendix B: Herbert Hoover High School Case Study](#)
- [Appendix C: Bibb County School District Case Study](#)
- [Appendix D: Master Scheduling Self-Assessment](#)