

MINDSHIFT

Why A School's Master Schedule Is A Powerful Enabler of Change



Luella High students work together. (Gail Chapman/Luella High School)

When Jerry Smith became a principal six years ago he had been teaching for 22 years, so his administrative style is firmly rooted in the belief that the important stuff goes on in classrooms. When he took over [Luella High School](#) outside Atlanta, he began thinking about how he could propel fundamental change in what was then a traditional comprehensive high school. When a third of the students and a big chunk of the staff relocated to a new high school the district opened to ease crowding at Luella, Smith knew the moment was ripe for even bigger shifts.

“We said we’re going to put anything and everything on the table and try to do this differently,” Smith said. He was appalled that the current system prioritized

churning out graduates, many of whom weren't actually "college and career ready -- life ready," as the school's mission statement boldly pronounces. And, the school certainly wasn't doing a good job by its gifted students or those who were struggling, Smith said.

'If we don't match our minutes to our mission, [teachers are] not going to shift.'

— Diana Laufenberg, Executive Director of Inquiry Schools

"If you are truly going to reach every student you have to see education as a personal thing for every person who walks into the building, including the adults," Smith said. He and a team of teachers set out to try to reconfigure how this big high school could structurally put student relationships with teachers at the center, and value mastery of content above all else. The school ultimately [won a Next Generation Systems Initiative grant](#) from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to jump-start their efforts.

It soon became clear that one of the biggest obstacles to instructional changes of the sort Smith and his team were trying to engineer was the school schedule itself. Comprehensive high schools like Luella offer a wide variety of classes, everything from Advanced Placement courses to art, band, career and technical courses. All the choices is one of the strong suits of high school right now. But the variety of classes and the teachers required to teach them, along with contractual barriers to how many periods a teacher can instruct in a row without a break, and things like lunch and bus schedules, make altering the schedule a huge challenge.

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“Our schedule is a function of what we’re trying to create,” said Diana Laufenberg, executive director of [Inquiry Schools](#) and a former high school history teacher at Science Leadership Academy. Laufenberg is working with schools across the country to transform pedagogical models toward more [inquiry-driven approaches](#). She says what Smith and his team in Georgia are trying to do is some of the hardest work in education.

There are plenty of charter networks and magnet programs gaining acclaim for their innovative teaching models, but most school-age children go to existing public schools. Laufenberg compares the situation to city building. A city can’t modernize by constructing new buildings but ignoring the underlying infrastructure. When a road is rutted, it doesn’t work to just build a new road. The original road must be fixed. In the educational context, existing schools need system-level change if the system as a whole is going to shift.

“When you are trying to do a transformation, if you don’t have some kind of major lever, you have varying levels of success of your program,” Laufenberg said. Changing the master schedule, while difficult, is a major signal to everyone connected to the school that pedagogy is shifting. “If we don’t match our minutes to our mission, [teachers are] not going to shift.”

LUELLA'S SHIFT

At Luella High, three teachers of the same subject, sophomore English, for example, all teach during the same

period. The students in those three sections can then rotate between teachers, depending on their individual needs. For example, one teacher might lead a literature discussion with a larger group of students while another teacher helps a smaller group with their writing and a third is working with students applying their knowledge in a project.

“What’s different for us is that we’ve designed a model that is basically a rotational model, but it doesn’t look the same in math as it does in foreign language, as it does in English,” Smith said. It's like the "station rotation model" in elementary school, but it changes depending on the grade level, content, discipline and the needs of the students in that cohort.

“What we’re not going to do is say we’re a personalized learning school and say one model works for everyone,” Smith said. “That’s crazy.” He has designated personal learning coaches moving between cohorts to help teachers identify student needs and to think through how the professional learning community of teachers working together might improve the model.

'Society has taught children to be spoon-fed and if it doesn't work out someone is going to rescue you. Well, we're not doing that.'

— Jerry Smith, Principal Luella High School

“The rotational model is meant to give kids some choice and to let them be in different settings, because we all know we perform differently in different settings,” Smith said.

The other big part of the model is constant formative assessment to determine how well students are picking up knowledge and skills. And every four weeks students take a summative assessment designed by teachers and tied to the standards. That assessment gives the instructional team a snapshot of where each student stands at that moment in time and where students need more work. The rotation and groups can be adjusted accordingly.

“It’s sloppy, but hell, life is sloppy,” Smith said. His team is slowly changing the instructional approach grade by grade. They started with ninth grade and are now working to modify 11th grade. Smith says this model requires that students take ownership of their own learning, and that transition has been one of the hardest to make at Luella.

“That’s probably the most difficult and weakest area we have because society has taught children to be spoon-fed and if it doesn’t work out someone is going to rescue you,” Smith said. “Well, we’re not doing that.”

In addition to a schedule that allows for the rotation model, Smith also wanted to create opportunities for interdisciplinary work and was trying to be mindful of how many exams students would be taking at the same time. He also wanted to keep all of the 19 AP courses Luella offers, including the section of BC Calculus that only had eight students enrolled.

To achieve a schedule that accommodates all these competing priorities, Smith has had to give up some things, and he’s planning to hand schedule the entire building next year. Existing scheduling software isn’t designed to handle

the priorities Smith wanted and would “break the pedagogical model” if relied upon to do the scheduling.



WHAT IT TAKES

Leading a school transformation like this one is hard work and requires constantly pushing toward the vision. When Luella started this work Smith said he got reactions from across the spectrum. Some parents were distrustful of the changes, while others thought they sounded like a good idea. Some teachers left because they didn't agree with the new pedagogical focus, but others have thrived and led the changes. Smith said he tries to be as transparent as possible with the community about why decisions are being made, while always holding firm to his central principle -- the school should be serving all its students better.

'I see a lot of people really turning into everything that's new is better and everything that's old is bad, which it's not.'

— Diana Laufenberg

“The systems of schools are so habitual, shifting practice has to be as concerted as quitting smoking,” Laufenberg said. “You need to have a plan for your bad day.” She said there are days when even the teachers most committed to inquiry-based teaching are going to want to lecture. And that’s the equivalent of sneaking out for a cigarette. Changing is hard and when people get tired they will want to return to the status quo. She’s worked with teachers at Luella to develop inquiry-based lessons to keep in their back pockets when it gets tough.

Laufenberg has watched many schools start a school transformation project with energy and vigor, but when leaders run into outside pressures from the district or can’t pick their way through the complex system they run out of momentum. It’s a common story, so common that many [teachers expect new programs and approaches to fail in a few years](#), or to die out when the superintendent takes a new job. And, since change is uncomfortable, many just wait it out. That’s why it’s important not to toss away good teaching practices just because they’ve been around for years.

“I see a lot of people really turning into everything that’s new is better and everything that’s old is bad, which it’s not,” Laufenberg said. For example, inquiry is currently in

the spotlight, but it's not a new idea. Similarly, advisory is an old idea that works. It's always a good idea to provide a care structure for kids as they move through school. "We don't need to get rid of that just because it's old," Laufenberg said.

For his part, Smith doesn't expect this work to ever become easy because it revolves around people, and people are messy. "What we see as order is really chaos and what we see as chaos is really order," Smith said. He doesn't want it to become orderly because that's not the natural state of human systems.

Individual success stories of students are what help keep him going. One boy with severe autism had been educated on his own in a rubber room in seventh grade. His mom didn't think he could handle a big high school, but Smith wanted to give him a shot. The student turned out to be incredibly gifted at math and loved playing in the band. A clear moment demonstrating his growth came when he asked to direct the band at the last home football game, a step outside his comfort zone that was uncharacteristic.

"When he walked across the stage [at graduation], we had taken a child who was in a rubber room in seventh grade and had given him a shot at life," Smith said. Many adults worked hard to get that student to graduation and they all felt a victory when he was successful.

On the other end of the spectrum, Smith will always remember a young woman who seemed to be perfect from the outside: good grades, cheerleader, the class valedictorian. But unbeknown to many of her friends and

teachers, she had a very difficult home life. For her valedictorian speech she decided to talk publicly about her depression and bulimia in hopes of changing someone else's reality.

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“We've got a long way to go in this work, but we are making progress and people are seeing that we're making progress,” Smith said. He's seen an uptick in ACT and SAT scores, attendance is better and discipline referrals are down. Those are all traditional markers of school improvement, but Smith isn't kidding himself that those things necessarily mean students are leaving school prepared for college, career and a good life. Every year he surveys seniors about how prepared they feel for those three things as they leave his care.

On a five-point scale, 30 percent of seniors rate life preparedness as a one or two. While some people might just see that as a matter of perception, Smith sees that as an indicator that he and his staff need to keep working to do better by students at Luella High.

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How Being Part of a 'House' Within a School Helps Students Gain A Sense of Belonging

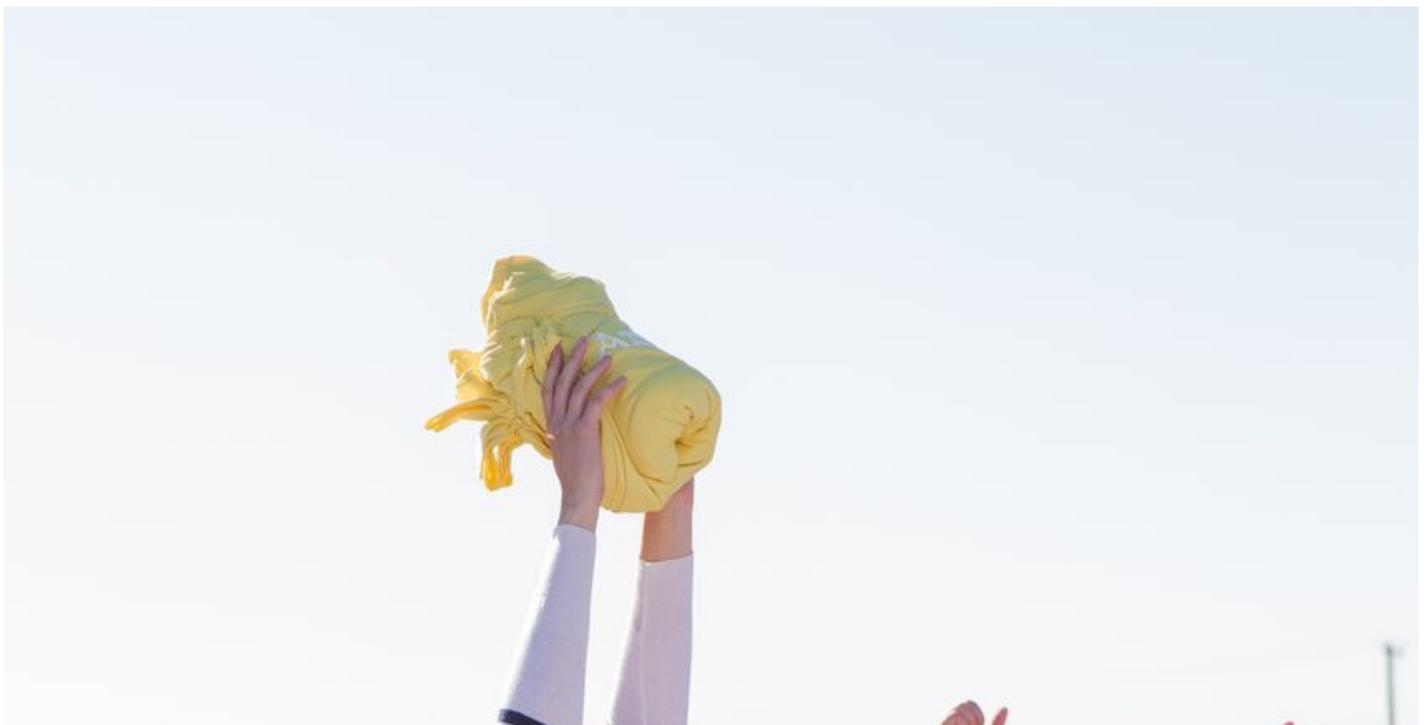


Students at Lake Canyon Elementary School sit together wearing their house colors. (Katie Fewell Photography)

Sept. 30, 2016 was a big day for Lake Canyon Elementary. Students, teachers, and staff arrived at the Galt, California, school wearing white shirts and before long were sent to stand by one of six large cardboard boxes. After a drum roll, cannons sprayed confetti over each cluster of students. The color matched one of six new banners, like the orange one reading “Sebete” and featuring a bear meant to symbolize courage. As music played, the boxes were ripped open to reveal matching T-shirts. Pulling them over their heads, students began doing something they’d continue every day until graduating: representing their house. Three semesters later, Principal Judi Hayes said, “Every part of our school culture now flows through the lens of the house system.”

If the image calls to mind Harry Potter being assigned to Gryffindor, that's not far off the mark. The term "house" derives from English boarding schools where students once lived in a series of modest dwellings. More than a few U.S. universities, including Notre Dame and Rice, still give their dormitories a larger significance by, for example, allowing each "residential college" its own advisers and social events. The attachments formed tend to be so significant that alumni, upon meeting one another, frequently ask, "What college were you?"

That sense of camaraderie and identity is part of what schools like Lake Canyon are trying to develop. "We have first-graders on our campus that would never have the opportunity to become buddies with a fifth-grader," Hayes said, "but now they see each other at the house meeting every Friday." Sixth-grade teacher Val Seamons added, "They really deck out for those," with kids even donning house-colored socks and tutus in a bid for extra points. Three days a week for the first two trimesters of the year, students eat lunch with their houses, and every morning the winning house from the previous day is announced. The house system also gives children the opportunity to interact with teachers they normally would have no cause to know, Hayes said, "creating smaller communities within the larger community where they can make stronger bonds and connections."





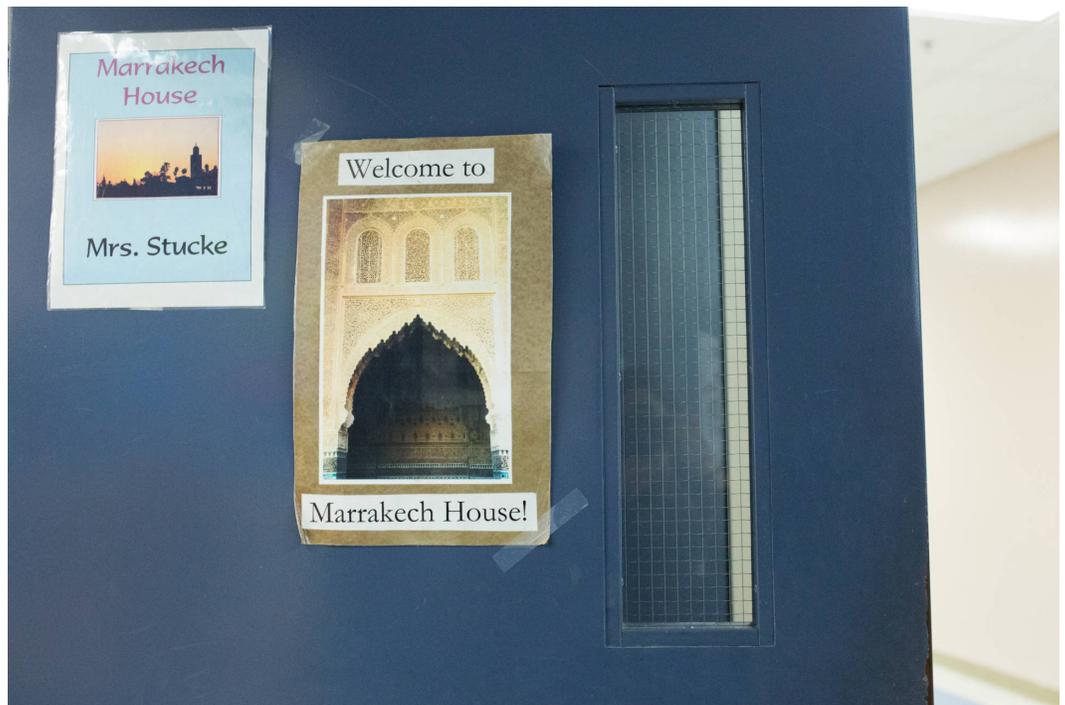
Lake Canyon Elementary School ceremony assigning students to a house. (Katie Fewell Photography)

Those ties can be critical when dealing with children touched by trauma. Seamons described a first-grader who lost her mother, a teacher at the school, when a colloid cyst burst in the 34-year-old's brain. Seamons said she expressed concern to the students of Sebeta: "And the first kid stood up, and he said, 'The Sebeta house has got her.' And this went all down the line. The kids were all like, 'We've got her. The house has got her.'"

Other opportunities to develop leadership skills arise from the patterns established by the house system, Seamons said. Sixth-graders shepherd kindergartners from their classrooms to house meetings, and some students have been tapped to take over house planning duties from the teachers.

Principal Hayes believes these mentoring activities are to thank for helping reduce bullying and other behavioral problems. Since the house system was introduced at Lake Canyon, suspensions went from nine to zero, she said, and instances of students being sent to the office for discipline greatly decreased.

A sense of inclusion and engagement in a common enterprise can have academic benefits as well as social-emotional ones, according to Jennifer Kloczko, the principal of Stoneridge Elementary School in Roseville, California. Two teams of her teachers traveled to observe Lake Canyon's house system in action as they launched their own. "When kids are really excited about school," Kloczko said, "they are happier and they tend to learn more." It's a proposition supported by [scholarly research](#) tying a heightened sense of belonging to increased achievement.



Signs indicating Marrakech house at Hillsdale High School. (KQED/Samantha Shanahan)

HELPING KIDS TRANSITION

Another touted benefit of houses is easing transitions. Last year the incoming kindergarten students at Lake Canyon were welcomed by sixth-graders who had planned a new tradition. The big kids formed a cheering tunnel, placed a Hawaiian lei in one of the house colors around each little one's neck, and invited them to play. Jeff Gilbert, the principal of Hillsdale High School in the San Francisco Bay Area, credits his school's house system with helping ninth-graders acclimate to a student body of nearly 1,500 and what can be an overwhelming roster of classes and teachers.

Each Hillsdale ninth-grader spends five periods a day—math, English, social studies, science and advisory—with their 111 housemates. Four teachers coordinate with one another in mostly adjacent classrooms as they teach those subjects, and each takes responsibility for advising 28 of

the house's students, whom they follow through the end of sophomore year.

“You talk about students all the time,” Gilbert said. “You know every family, and you know every student. You stop dealing with them in these sort of large abstract cohorts.” In addition to allowing for “much more individualized responses,” he said, the house system helps replicate the coherence of the elementary experience. “Our honors students know our special ed students,” he said. “It’s not always perfect, but those cliques and those tensions have dramatically reduced.”



Teachers within the same house meet on a regular basis to discuss needs of students. Hillsdale High School English teacher Andrew Hartig (left), math teacher Michael McCall and other teachers within Marrakech House share observations on students and discuss solutions for how they can help. (*Samantha Shanahan/KQED*)

Modern elementary and secondary house systems aren't just a California thing. The 735 kindergarten through fifth-grade students at Richard J. Lee Elementary School in the small Dallas suburb of Coppell, Texas, eat lunch with their houses. Ottway Elementary in Greenville, Tennessee,

provides students with lanyards marked by the colors and names of the school's four houses, each named for a rare gemstone. And at Jackson Road Elementary School in Griffin, Georgia—where houses have not just missions, colors, chants and symbols but also hand signs and mottos—each classroom contains four colored containers. Students who earn a house point are given a bean to place in their house's container which, along with the others, gets periodically emptied into a larger one near the front office.

BENEFITS TO SCHOOLS

Educators at schools like these claim additional systemic advantages. Gilbert said he thinks Hillsdale's house system empowers teachers and in so doing gives the high school an edge in recruitment and retention. Kloczko said Stoneridge's houses help attract parents in Roseville's choice system: "It makes us special." And according to Hayes, the staff at Lake Canyon is more united "because now they have another small group ... they are collaborating with."

Of course, the specific successes of Lake Canyon might have something to do with the way the school rolled out the idea. In the spring of 2016, Hayes, Seamons and six others traveled to the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, a nonprofit middle school created to serve as a model school for educator training programs. After observing a house system in action there, the group volunteered to form a committee, calling themselves "the Hags" for "House Advisory Group."

They introduced staff to the concept before school let out for summer and asked for help choosing the six character

traits that would determine the house identities. “We really wanted a buy-in from the rest of the staff,” Seamons said. “They were familiar with the Harry Potter books,” Hayes added, “so it wasn’t a completely foreign concept,” but she made sure to hammer home the potential benefits. She was also careful not to demand too much extra work from teachers, setting aside about 25 minutes out of each 90-minute staff meeting for planning house meeting activities.

“There was no rhyme or reason” to the way Lake Canyon split students, teachers and staff up into six groups. They didn’t even pay attention to gender, but Hayes said, “It all kind of worked out.” (One thing the committee did message: placement of children with special needs to ensure proper support.) Some people anticipated problems with students wanting to switch houses, but Hayes said that hasn’t really happened. “With the older kids, maybe their best friend is in a different house, and that’s an issue at lunch perhaps,” Seamons said, “but not really.”

TOOLS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

One focus the Hags maintained throughout was positivity. In order for the house system to function as an effective way to reinforce desired behavior, unlike at Hogwarts, teachers and staff at Lake Canyon only award points, never taking them away. Seamons said teachers also take steps to emphasize the “friendly” part of “friendly competition,” because students need to be taught “how to compete successfully.”

Dan Green helped launch a house system at California’s Goleta Valley Junior High in 2003. In a [paper on the topic](#),

he wrote that some teachers worried competition might decrease collegiality and self-esteem. Administrators there responded by carefully calibrating the point system “to award participation, effort and growth just as much as achievement,” Green reported.

Lake Canyon’s experience would seem to provide a roadmap for successful implementation, but it might not be that simple. Hayes paid for things like the banners and T-shirts with a portion of [federal funds the district won in 2012](#). At Stoneridge, Kloczko relied on the financial support of the school’s Parent Teacher Club, as well as nine teachers who fundraised to attend the Ron Clark Academy. Gilbert said Hillsdale received a smaller learning community planning grant in the late 1990s and another grant in 2002.

Aside from some expense, “it requires a long-term commitment,” Hayes said, as well as whole-school involvement.

There also doesn’t yet seem to be reliable data on the efficacy of houses. Lake Canyon’s suspensions decreased, yes, but causation is difficult to establish since the school launched a restorative justice discipline model around the same time.

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Hayes was careful to add a final caveat: For a house system to succeed, there has to be something substantive behind it, an underlying ethos being reinforced. At Lake Canyon, that's a [list of 33 “soft skills”](#) such as “do not brag” and “be courteous.”

“The houses are not just a thing that you do,” Kloczko agreed. “It’s really your whole school culture.”

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