How Much Free Time Do 12th Graders Really Have?

5 strategies to close the college readiness gap by re-engaging 12th grade students

The Challenge:

Across the country, thousands of students are graduating from high school unprepared to succeed in college. Although these students may have met state or local requirements for high school graduation, many of them discover once they arrive at college that they must first enroll in expensive remedial courses before they can even begin earning credit. One way school systems can help close this gap between college eligibility and college readiness is by promoting 12th grade student engagement. All too often, 12th grade students who have already met basic graduation requirements, for example, two years of math, two years of science, etc., opt not to take a full load of classes in their senior year. While some students may use their free time to take courses at a local community college or to participate in an internship, many students do not. What can districts do to boost 12th grade student engagement and better prepare their students for academic or career success post-graduation?

The Data:

When analyzing student schedules in District R (East, 30K students), ERS discovered that the amount of unscheduled time (excluding lunch) in the average 12th grade student’s schedule varied widely. On average in this district, 12th grade students were unassigned for 12 percent of their school day. For an 8-period instructional school day, this translates to students having roughly one free period every day for the entire year, even after accounting for lunch. More importantly, one-third of 12th graders have significantly more unscheduled time than this.
The Solution:

It can be tempting for students to want to take it easy during their senior year, especially if they’ve already met basic high school graduation requirements. But doing so does not adequately prepare them for future college and career success. Districts can help 12th graders make the best use of their time by shifting the focus away from simply completing high school requirements to emphasizing the need to develop college- and career-readiness skills.

To do this, districts can consider both strengthening the offerings within the district as well as connecting students to additional learning opportunities outside of the district. It’s essential to design the solution you choose in light of the goal of college and career success: What do students need to be successful in college and their careers? How can we design new offerings or re-engage them in existing offerings that will meet these needs? Potential solutions include:

Unfortunately, this trend is not unique to District R. In fact, across the country, ERS has found that on average, 12th grade students are unscheduled for eight percent to 32 percent of their school day. None of these districts routinely tracked this statistic, but these free periods are missed opportunities to help students develop the skills they need to succeed post-graduation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Average % Unscheduled Time for 12th Grade Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District L</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District F</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District A</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District C</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District G</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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To do this, districts can consider both strengthening the offerings within the district as well as connecting students to additional learning opportunities outside of the district. It’s essential to design the solution you choose in light of the goal of college and career success: What do students need to be successful in college and their careers? How can we design new offerings or re-engage them in existing offerings that will meet these needs? Potential solutions include:
1. Encouraging students to attend college-preparatory courses within their schools that may not be required for graduation but are designed to reinforce core content areas often covered by remedial college courses and to support students in developing the soft skills that are critical to college and career success.

2. Incentivizing students to enroll in school-based elective choices by rethinking the topics being offered and ensuring they are fully relevant to students’ interests and experiences.

3. Facilitating dual enrollment at a local community college, which is often available to local students and schools at a lower cost.

4. Organizing internships with local community partners and using these internships as a way to reinforce core academic and life skills (i.e., through a project-based or expeditionary learning approach).

5. Taking advantage of virtual learning opportunities to give students access to a wider breadth of elective opportunities without creating new sections.

Finally, it’s important to note that lack of engagement in 12th grade may be due to barriers students face outside of school. Some students may have experienced trauma or have family responsibilities that present significant obstacles to staying engaged, and others may feel pressure to work during non-required school hours to earn income. Before determining how to increase student engagement, districts and schools need to consider students’ context and what supplemental support they might need above and beyond access to credit-earning courses. Investment in social-emotional support, wraparound services, and/or greater flexibility in when and how students take courses will increase the odds that 12th grade engagement is achieved and sustained over time.
The Calculation: Analyzing Unscheduled Student Time in Your District

Step 1: First, determine the total number of instructional periods in the school day at each of your schools. Make sure to exclude lunch, passing time, or any other schoolwide free time from this calculation. For example, if there’s a school with an 8-period day, but all students receive one period off for lunch, then the school would have a 7-instructional-period day.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>P1</th>
<th>P2</th>
<th>P3</th>
<th>P4</th>
<th>P5</th>
<th>P6</th>
<th>P7</th>
<th>P8</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
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<td>0.5</td>
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<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 4</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Lunch</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student 6</td>
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</table>

Step 2: The next step is to exclude from your analysis any 12th grade students who are “overscheduled,” i.e., students who are taking more classes than the official length of the instructional day. This often happens for students who opt to skip lunch and take an extra class instead. We suggest you exclude these students because they are already taking advantage of the instructional time available to them, and including their percentages will artificially increase your average percentages, thus masking the problem that exists among students who are unscheduled.

In our example table shown above:
Student 6 is taking eight classes in a 7-instructional-period day by skipping lunch
= We would exclude Student 6 from our analysis for being overscheduled

Step 3: Now, you want to calculate the total number of instructional periods that 12th grade students should be enrolled in. This will serve as the denominator for our calculation around unscheduled student time. To do this, multiply the total number of instructional periods in the school day by the total enrollment of 12th grade students at each school.

In our example table shown above:
7-instructional-period day x five 12th grade students
= 35 total instructional periods that 12th grade students should be enrolled in
**Step 4:** Next, you will calculate the total number of instructional periods that your 12th grade students are actually enrolled in. This will serve as the numerator for our calculation around unscheduled student time. Using your course schedule data, add up the total number of classes taken by the 12th graders at each school.

- Make the appropriate adjustments based on how often classes meet; for example, classes that meet every other day should only be counted as a 0.5 period class, whereas classes that meet every other day and that only meet for a single semester (half the year) should only be counted as a 0.25 period class.

- Also, make sure to account for periods where 12th grade students may already be enrolled in courses outside of school, for example, taking classes at local community college or participating in an internship study.

In our example above, the total number of instructional periods that 12th grade students are actually enrolled in is 30.

**In our example:**
Sum of all the classes actually taken by 12th graders at the school = 30

**Step 5:** To calculate the percentage of unscheduled time for 12th graders, simply divide the metric from Step 3, total number of instructional periods that 12th grade students are actually enrolled in, by the metric from Step 2, total number of instructional periods that 12th grade students should be enrolled in.

**In our example:**
Total number of instructional periods that 12th grade students are actually enrolled: 30
Total number of instructional periods that 12th grade students should be enrolled in: 35

= 86% of 12th grade student time is currently scheduled
= 14% of 12th grade student time is currently unscheduled

By comparing the percentage of unscheduled time across your schools, you can identify schools that could benefit from taking a more rigorous approach to engaging its 12th graders for college and career readiness.

**Endnotes**
School System 20/20 includes both a vision for transformative change as well as a methodology for charting a path and measuring progress toward that change across the seven areas above. Using a data-driven approach, it enables districts to see exactly how resources—people, time, and money—are deployed and to identify where they can better meet student and teacher needs.

School System 20/20 assessment tools help district leaders measure and track the conditions for change and their resource use. Based on our experience working with districts, on our extensive district database and on published research, the tools use qualitative and quantitative metrics to evaluate progress.

Education Resource Strategies (ERS) is a non-profit organization dedicated to transforming how urban school systems organize resources—people, time, and money—so that every school succeeds for every student.