

Lunch and Learn: Testing the Theory of Change

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Education

Introduction

In Philadelphia's predominantly white and wealthy Main Line suburb, a new lunch policy has taken high schools by storm. Originally introduced in 2015 by Harriton High School's administration, Lunch and Learn has since spread to most public high schools in the area. Lunch and Learn was originally a corporate strategy in which employees attended training with free lunch as an incentive (Indeed Editorial Team, 2024). As a high school lunch policy, Lunch and Learn takes a different approach. In general, Lunch and Learn offers an extended lunch period in which all students are free and encouraged to visit teachers for help or to make up assignments, meet with counselors, pursue club activities, eat their lunch, or decompress with friends. However, every school has a different implementation that often makes Lunch and Learn hard to define and evaluate.

When Harriton High School first introduced Lunch and Learn, it argued that the policy would "maximize learning and...boost the amount [of] people who were able to get help from teachers" (Willkomm & Marks, 2015). In 2022, nearby Radnor High School implemented Lunch and Learn as part of its Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). This policy was specifically introduced to "provide extra help for those who may be at-risk or just need additional support" (Radnor High School, 2022, p.2). Most recently, Conestoga High School, the site of this study, implemented Lunch and Learn for its 2024-2025 school year. Conestoga High School claimed that Lunch and Learn would "[improve] staff and student mental health" (Chen et al., 2024).

Despite these strong assertions, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that Lunch and Learn is or is not an effective means of attaining these goals. This study aims to fill the gap in the research by investigating key elements of Lunch and Learn's theory of change and examining them with respect to evidence gathered at Conestoga High School.

Before discussing Lunch and Learn's theory of change, it is necessary to give an overview of Lunch and Learn at Conestoga High School. Per Conestoga High School Principal Dr. Amy Meisinger, Lunch and Learn gives students one hour twice per week to "catch up on schoolwork, meet with teachers, enjoy time with friends, ... [or do] whatever [they] need to do on a specific day" (Conestoga High School, 2024, 0:41). This one-hour period is offered on Wednesday and Thursday of each week. All students, numbering more than 2,300, are free during this period. Students are also able to take advantage of activities like working out in the gym, meeting counselors, and pursuing club activities (Chen et al., 2024). Seniors with off-campus privileges can spend the entire hour off campus. Teachers are required to be available for at least 30 minutes during each Lunch and Learn period. On Monday, Tuesday, and Friday, the student body is split between three 30-minute lunches during which this plethora of activities is not offered.

To accommodate this one-hour period, Conestoga's schedule was changed. The new schedule, called a "mixed model" (Chen et al., 2024) schedule, has students move between eight 42-minute periods on Monday, Tuesday, and Friday. On Wednesday and Thursday, students follow a block schedule in which odd-numbered courses meet on Wednesday and even-numbered courses meet on Thursday for 82 minutes each. This is the first schedule change for Conestoga in over 30 years (Chen et al., 2024). Previously, students had eight 43-minute periods every day.

Thus, with the exception of the freshmen, students at Conestoga are used to having their classes meet every day.

Finally, Conestoga implemented Harriton's somewhat controversial "passport" system before abolishing it six weeks later. This system is not documented in any of Conestoga's released articles about Lunch and Learn, and the author learned about it from asking students. The passport system mandated that freshmen report to an assigned classroom for half of their Lunch and Learn period for a study hall. To leave that classroom and receive academic support from their teachers, students were required to get a signature in their passports (a small booklet with their name on it) from the teacher or support staff they visited. Freshmen were also required to get a signature if they wanted to study in the library instead. Failure to get a signature would result in disciplinary action. Harriton students critiqued this system, saying that the "new mandated [study hall] contradicts the 'freedom' aspect of the one hour a day we get to meet one-on-one with our teachers" (Perlstein, 2021). Despite this resistance, Conestoga used the passport system to help freshmen adjust to their newfound freedom.

The Theory of Change

The theory of change is a common policy analysis framework that identifies a problem that the policy aims to solve, how the policy seeks a solution, the short-term, intermediate, and long-term goals of the policy, and the assumptions that underlie the policy. Malen et al. (2002) note that identifying a policy's theory of change is important because "these theories...provide the public justification for the human and fiscal costs of reform and the analytic mechanism for tracking actual policy effects and comparing them to stated policy aims" (p.114). Therefore, the theory of change of Lunch and Learn needs to be uncovered so it can be subjected to empirical analysis.

Problem

There are two main problems identified in Lunch and Learn policy documents. The first is that students and teachers do not have enough time to access each other during the day under a regular schedule. Many high school schedules, especially those with as many as eight periods, often do not give students and teachers the same free periods, thus requiring both students and teachers to meet during lunch (if they have the same lunch) or before or after school. In a skit produced by Conestoga High School to introduce Lunch and Learn, one student asked another, “Have you ever needed to speak to a teacher, but your free periods and lunch schedules don’t line up?” The student responded, “Obviously! I go to ‘Stoga!” (Conestoga High School, 2024, 0:21). Radnor High School (2022) explicitly says in their Lunch and Learn policy documents that “students and teachers needed more time to access one another” (p.4). All schools that implemented Lunch and Learn recognized that there were not enough opportunities for students and teachers to access each other.

The second problem is that students are overwhelmed and experiencing mental health struggles. In the same video by Conestoga High School (2024), a student is asked, “Have you ever needed to take a break during the school day, but you don’t have a free [period]?” The student replied with an enthusiastic “Yeah!” (0:16). Central Bucks South High School (2020), which implemented Lunch and Learn in 2021 and has similar student demographics to Conestoga High School, offered a sobering statistic: “1 in 3 [Central Bucks School District] students reported feeling sad or depressed most days in the past 12 months” (p.2). While Conestoga does not offer its mental health statistics, it did state that improving mental health for students was the main priority when discussing whether to implement Lunch and Learn (Chen et

al., 2024). Many schools nationwide are facing similar mental health crises and looking for solutions.

Solution

The solution to both problems for Main Line high schools is to implement Lunch and Learn twice per week to give students the freedom to use the resources that they need, whether those resources are academic or related to mental health. This aspect of Lunch and Learn emphasizes capacity-building, as students are given more opportunities to access their teachers and each other, thus hopefully giving students the tools to solve the two problems noted above by themselves. The hour could be used to access teachers, thus addressing the first problem, or socialize with friends, participate in clubs, or do schoolwork, thus addressing the second problem.

This solution was not hastily thought of. In 2022, Conestoga created a scheduling committee to identify weaknesses of the current schedule, needs of the school, and potential schedule options to meet these needs (Chen et al., 2024). This committee, comprised of students, staff, and parents, worked for over two years to agree on a new schedule in which Lunch and Learn was included. The committee visited four different high schools with Lunch and Learn, conducted focus groups, and administered a survey to Conestoga students, parents, and staff before finalizing the new schedule. This is a strong example of the learning policy tool since the policymakers conducted extensive research to create a policy that met the needs of the people who would be affected by it.

Short-term Goal

The short-term goal of Lunch and Learn is to increase students' access to academic resources. This is done in two ways: Firstly, by giving students a one-hour period of time when all students and teachers are free, administrators enable students to meet their teachers without having to schedule meetings before or after school. Teachers are more accessible to students, and students are more accessible to teachers since teachers can also ask students to visit them during that time. For teachers, this is an opportunity to provide support outside of class. Additionally, other academic resources at Conestoga, like the Achievement Center – a room with full-time math, science, and English tutors as well as peer tutors from the National Honors Society – are available during this time as well. Secondly, by implementing a block schedule, Conestoga increases the amount of contact that students have with their teachers during a single period. Teachers emphasized that extended periods make it easier for them to give detailed one-on-one feedback for longer learning endeavors, like writing an essay or solving a complex problem (Chen et al., 2024). Therefore, just by implementing Lunch and Learn and a schedule that can fit it, Conestoga is increasing students' access to academic resources.

Intermediate Goal

The intermediate goal of Lunch and Learn is to improve students' time management skills. By giving students so many options to choose from during Lunch and Learn, students are forced to pick and choose which opportunities to take advantage of. Seeing a teacher during Lunch and Learn may prohibit them from working out or going to a club meeting. Students may find themselves choosing between spending the hour with their friends or visiting one of many academic resources available to them. Students have to choose the best option for themselves, and that can help them develop their time management skills. As is common for a capacity-building policy, the resources are made available, but students must choose to use them

themselves. However, the name itself, Lunch and Learn, is a symbolic tool that reminds students that this hour is meant to be used both socially (Lunch) and academically (Learn).

The passport system implemented for freshmen was a mandate with heavy sanctions imposed for students who do not follow it. The passport system forced freshmen to use half of their Lunch and Learn period as a study hall. One intended consequence is that freshmen develop time management skills because they learn to use half of the period for socializing or going to club meetings, and the other half is dedicated to doing work or visiting teachers. The passport system sought to cultivate time management skills that students in higher grades were expected to have. Perhaps, the Conestoga administration assumed that without this mandate, freshmen would not develop time management skills and take advantage of the academic resources offered during this time.

Long-term Goal

The long-term goal of Lunch and Learn is to improve students' mental health. Central Bucks South High School (2020) articulates this goal clearly: "The Lunch and Learn schedule allows students to...strengthen [intellectual and interpersonal] skills which will, in turn, strengthen their relationships inside and outside of the classroom" (p.3). The hour-long period can be used to relax with friends, decompress from schoolwork, and visit counselors. Students can also reduce their stress by using the period as a study hall to finish their homework or attending club meetings held during the school day instead of before or after it. On the other hand, Radnor High School's satirical newspaper, *The Radish*, published an article about the negative consequences of Lunch and Learn: "One student reports, 'I am running from place to place trying to get from one meeting with a teacher to another meeting with a club whilst being on a zoom meeting running from Alaska'" (Nasrullah, 2022). The article suggests that instead of

reducing stress over time, Lunch and Learn will increase stress as it becomes an hour full of activities that pull students away from their friends, homework, and lunches.

Conestoga's own students have been critical of how Lunch and Learn supposedly supports students' mental health. Conestoga alumnus Ben Shapiro (2024) called Lunch and Learn a "mere [Band-Aid]" that does not meaningfully address the escalating stress and academic pressures faced by students. He suggests setting a limit on the number of AP courses that a student can take. However, this cap would potentially hurt the academic outcomes of Conestoga students, so administrators avoided implementing such a rule. Instead, they implemented Lunch and Learn, which, while potentially offering mental health support indirectly, does not directly aid students in reducing stress.

Assumptions

The foremost assumption made in a Lunch and Learn policy is that students will choose the resources that they need. Lunch and Learn does not force students (other than freshmen) to seek academic or counseling resources, instead offering a timeslot for these resources to be accessed during the school day. Lunch and Learn equips students with the tools to achieve these ends, consistent with capacity-building policies. Students may choose to ignore the academic resources in favor of relaxing with friends. Further, an assumption is made that if students choose the resources they need, the resources will be available. For example, there are nine counselors and three mental health specialists for over 2,300 students at Conestoga High School. It may be difficult to get an appointment due to the volume of students. Additionally, students could choose to see their teachers, but if even a few students from each class came, the teacher would have to support more than a dozen students at once. That is not the personalized attention that Lunch and Learn seeks to give.

Another assumption is that providing more time for students to access their teachers or each other is sufficient for improving mental health. Notably, these schools are not changing their curriculums. Conestoga math teacher Seth Shore said, “We still have to get through the same amount of material, even though we’re only going to have four face-to-face meetings a week instead of five” (Chen et al., 2024). Students may feel even greater stress since more material needs to be condensed into fewer class sessions. Similarly, there is an assumption that teachers will adapt their lessons to fit the 82-minute periods. A teacher may plan for a 42-minute class and have a substantial part of that be a lecture. Listening to a lecture for most of a 42-minute period is very different from listening to a lecture for most of an 82-minute period, and most students may struggle with the latter.

Finally, there is an assumption that any high school, especially Conestoga, has enough space to contain all students being free at once. The winter season, with its rain, snow, and cold, will take away most of the outdoor space that students can use during other seasons. Managing thousands of students in an enclosed space, and the trash, crumbs, and potentially rodents that could result from that, will be a challenge.

Literature Review

While Lunch and Learn has no direct empirical evidence to support or deny its claims, there are some tangentially related empirical studies that lend Lunch and Learn some authority.

The Effects of Friends on Mental Health

Advocates of Lunch and Learn claim that it will improve the mental health of students. It does so in multiple ways, but the predominant way is by providing more time for peer and friend interactions. However, do friends positively affect mental health? Mackin et al. (2017) evaluated

the extent to which social support buffered stress for 550 adolescent girls. Controlling for differences in age and parental education levels, the researchers analyzed data generated through surveys and found that peer support can protect adolescents from mental health issues. Thus, the claim that Lunch and Learn will improve the mental health of students by increasing peer access has merit. Students who use Lunch and Learn for socializing instead of academic support may show mental health improvements and could be said to be using the time productively.

The Effects of Increasing Lunchtime

Lunch and Learn offers an extended period for lunch. Normally, students at Conestoga only have 30 minutes to eat and socialize, but Lunch and Learn doubles this time to one hour. The effects of increasing lunchtime have been researched and found to be overwhelmingly beneficial. Cohen et al. (2021) studied elementary schools in Anchorage School District that increased their times for lunch from 20 to 25 or 30 minutes. Through this evaluative study, they found that students' self-reported hunger levels were significantly lower, and self-reported happiness levels were significantly higher compared to other elementary schools in the district that did not implement longer lunches. Teachers were also interviewed to determine the effects of this policy in the classroom, and they overwhelmingly reported that students had improved behavior. While this study was done with elementary school students, it can be extrapolated that an extended period for lunch would have similar effects for high school students. Thus, perhaps even if academic resources were not offered, the extended period for lunch alone would be sufficient for improving students' quality of life.

The Effects of Block Scheduling

While the effects of different schedules continue to be debated within the education community, studies have supported shifting from traditional schedules with all classes to block schedules with only half of the classes every day. Flocco (2004) conducted an evaluative study that sought to find how schedule type (traditional versus block) affected students' stress levels. The researcher compared two schools with similar rigor and student demographics, with one school operating under a traditional schedule, and the other under a block schedule. Through a regression analysis, Flocco found that students using a traditional schedule had significantly higher perceptions of academic stress compared to those using a block schedule. Thus, by incorporating a block schedule for Lunch and Learn, students may benefit from the schedule itself and not just from the Lunch and Learn period.

Methods

With a dearth of empirical evidence to support Lunch and Learn as a whole, this study sought to explore the implementation of the policy by questioning students and to ascertain how well this policy was achieving its short-term, intermediate, and long-term goals according to its professed theory of change. This qualitative study took place solely at Conestoga High School, where the author works.

Participants

Participants in this study were adolescents attending Conestoga High School. There were five participants. Two participants were freshmen, one was a sophomore, one was a junior, and one was a senior. Thus, three out of five had experienced the previous schedule. All students were recruited in Conestoga's Achievement Center. The two upperclassmen were tutors from the National Honors Society, and the three underclassmen were frequent tutees and past students of the author. Participants were not monetarily incentivized to participate, but all were interested in

sharing their Lunch and Learn experiences. All participants will be referred to by their year, and the freshmen will be referred to as Freshman A and Freshman B.

Data Collection

Data was collected by two methods. Firstly, the author was a participant-observer who worked at Conestoga High School. As an insider at Conestoga, the author was familiar with the previous schedule and was able to discuss the policy with teachers and administration in informal conversations. The author also participated in Lunch and Learn by acting as one of the academic resources for students to use. Secondly, all participants completed a survey. The survey was designed with a mix of seven open-ended implementation and evaluation questions. Questions on the survey included the following:

- What do your Lunch and Learn periods actually look like? What do you actually do during them?
- Are there any obstacles that you've encountered that prohibit you from taking full advantage?

The survey sought to elicit how students, as street-level bureaucrats, were enacting Conestoga's Lunch and Learn policy and how their experiences differed from previous years. The survey was emailed to participants and completed independently. Anonymity was promised to students, and it was made clear that responses to this survey would not be given to Conestoga High School teachers or administrators.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved analyzing participants' responses systematically by question for common themes and agreements as well as exceptions. Emergent themes were tallied to see how

many participants mentioned each theme and whether it was representative of all participants. Themes were also coded by grade to see if there were any commonalities or differences between underclassmen and upperclassmen. Responses were also scrutinized for themes that supported and contradicted Lunch and Learn's theory of change, particularly the three goals and underlying assumptions. The author analyzed all responses to all questions, and colleagues corroborated these emerging themes by analyzing the survey data as well.

Testing the Theory of Change

The survey data suggests that although Lunch and Learn's theory of change may be flawed, it still has some benefits for students. For every way that Lunch and Learn's goals are met, there are also ways in which the implementation is antithetical to the goals. The implementation data brings up questions about how Lunch and Learn's success should be measured.

Short-term Goal: Increased Access to Academic Resources

The short-term, immediately achievable goal of Lunch and Learn is to increase students' access to academic resources. By giving students an hour for lunch, students can meet with their teachers and other academic resources during that time. Additionally, the block schedule increases the amount of contact that students have with their teachers during a single period. One important assumption is that these resources will be available for them to take advantage of. For example, it assumes that teachers will not be overwhelmed by the number of visiting students and thus be able to meet each student's needs.

Students Inconsistently Access Academic Resources

A major theme that emerged from participant data was that students inconsistently accessed academic resources. Four of five students mentioned meeting with their teachers or going to the Achievement Center during Lunch and Learn. The fifth student did not access their teachers, but they did use the time to study in the library. Despite these promising results, the Junior captured the dominant view: “Occasionally I go to teachers or meetings when I have questions or need help.” Both the Junior and the Senior emphasized the word “occasionally,” suggesting that the use of academic resources was sparse. The Sophomore corroborated these sentiments, saying, “Most of the time very little amounts [sic] of people use lunch and learn [sic] to go to teachers ask questions or go to a class [sic].” No students suggested a difficulty in accessing their teachers, but few students seem to take advantage of their teachers being available. This is consistent with observations made as a participant-observer. Some Lunch and Learn periods are bustling in the Achievement Center, while others are still and quiet.

Teachers Inconsistently Leverage Their Increased Time with Students

The promise of extended time with students once a week in their class made many teachers excited about new possibilities for feedback or projects. However, not all teachers take advantage of this increased time. The Senior pointed out, “We go over the normal material that we would during normal days [sic] but when we finish we rarely continue doing more, mostly just doing filler that’s related to the lesson for the rest of the class.” The differentiation between “normal material” and “filler” suggests that some teachers have not yet designed lessons that fit well in 82-minute periods. From informal discussions with teachers, it is clear that the inconsistency in the schedule, with some classes being 42 minutes and others being 82 minutes, makes lesson planning challenging. However, not all teachers are struggling to adapt. The Junior said that some of her teachers “break [class] up into different activities [sic] and some give us 5-

minute breaks at the halfway point.” Freshman B agreed. These findings suggest that teachers, like students, are inconsistent in leveraging the resources provided by Lunch and Learn.

Students Are Often Unable to Find Places to Do Work

Another major theme that emerged was the difficulty of finding suitable places to work. The Junior and Senior in particular, who rarely went to see their teachers, instead both complained about the difficulty of finding study spots. The Senior summed up their experience: “I find that the library is extremely loud and packed and its [sic] really hard to get meaningful work done, [sic] there is no real designated quiet place (that actually stays quiet) that isn’t as crowded to do work for non freshman [sic].” The noise of 2,300 students makes working challenging, so the professed option of students doing work during this time may not be true. It also suggests that the assumption that Conestoga has enough space to contain all of its students at once may not be faulty, but the assumption that Conestoga has enough space to let its students work in peace might be.

Intermediate Goal: Developing Time Management

The intermediate goal of Lunch and Learn is to improve students’ time management as they must pick and choose which opportunities to take advantage of according to their needs. Additionally, freshmen were forced into a passport system to accelerate the development of their time management skills.

Students Generally Use Lunch and Learn as They Need

As Dr. Meisinger said, Lunch and Learn is designed for students to do what they need to do, and it rests on the assumption that students will make the right choices about what they need. All participants noted using Lunch and Learn for various activities, including going to the gym,

driving off campus to get food, seeing teachers, using the Achievement Center, hanging out with friends, doing work, meeting with clubs, and visiting counselors. While the findings from the short-term goal call into question how often students are using academic resources, all participants used diverse resources at some point. Only the Sophomore pointed out the tension that they sometimes have: “Balancing social life and work/studies [is an obstacle] because sometimes I choose to just relax in the atrium with friends instead of doing an assignment or studying for a test.” This is certainly the difficulty of having so many choices during this period, and this tension is likely experienced by many students. This is consistent with observations as a participant-observer. Freshman A in particular has discussed outside of their survey response how their friends often try to pull them away from the Achievement Center to hang out instead.

Freshmen Dislike the Passport System

The passport system, which students at Harriton High School spoke out against and was eventually abolished by Conestoga High School, was condemned by both freshmen in their responses. Freshman A said it was “hard to keep track of,” and Freshman B said that the passports “weren’t the best.” However, Freshman A also admitted that “last year in middle school we dint [sic] have anything like this so it was hard and confusing to get used to.” It is unclear whether Lunch and Learn was a challenge because of the passports or despite the passports. Either way, the Sophomore’s response highlighted in the previous section suggests that multiple grades might benefit from more structure during this time, not just the freshmen. This may also be because this is the first year of implementation and so even upperclassmen are new to this experience.

Long-term Goal: Improve Students’ Mental Health

The long-term goal of Lunch and Learn is to improve students' mental health. This could happen in many ways, but the main way is by giving students more opportunities to meet with their friends during the extended period. This is an empirically backed way to improve or at least buffer students' mental health.

Students Frequently Meet with Friends

On the survey, all participants except for Freshman A reported using Lunch and Learn to spend time with friends, and Freshman A discussed meeting with friends after they took the survey. Three of five participants mentioned talking with friends as the first thing they do during Lunch and Learn. The Junior had the quintessential experience: "I usually sit with my friends for both halves of the Lunch and Learn periods. I eat for the first half, and for the second half I usually do homework and talk with my friends." For many, it seems that meeting with friends is the standard Lunch and Learn occurrence, and accessing other resources occasionally punctuates that time. It does make sense for students to spend this time with their friends, as they may not share the same lunch schedule for the other three days of the week. However, these findings do call into question what students without friends do during this time, and how this time makes them feel.

Students Do Not Use Mental Health Resources

Of all participants, only Freshman B reported going to a counselor, but they said it was "for help with school work [sic]," not for mental health support. No participant mentioned using any mental health resources, nor did any participant mention their own mental health or stress levels. While meeting with friends is one way of supporting mental health, it is unclear how else students' mental health is being supported by Lunch and Learn and how it is changing, if at all.

This is consistent with observations as a participant-observer. The mental health component of Lunch and Learn was mentioned in policy documents, but specific resources that students can take advantage of were not emphasized to students. Access to mental health resources was not made as abundantly clear as access to academic resources was.

Discussion

This study aimed to compare participants' responses to a survey against Lunch and Learn's theory of change to determine if the policy was doing what it proposed. These results represent the first empirical study of Lunch and Learn, and thus they should be used both by schools that have Lunch and Learn to evaluate its effectiveness and by schools that are considering adopting the policy in the future.

Participant responses reveal that while students benefit from Lunch and Learn, the benefits are not as pronounced as the policy suggests that they should be. Yes, students have increased access to academic and other resources, but it is also clear that few students seem to use these resources consistently. Instead, one of the biggest needs, quiet space to work, is not fulfilled. Whether students are truly developing time management is also unclear. Students know that resources are available, but the assumption that students will choose the resources they need when they need them seems to be weak. The main usage of Lunch and Learn is spending time with friends, which has been shown to buffer mental health (Mackin et al., 2017). It is not clear that mental health has improved for any of the participants, though the goal is a long-term one that may not appear within only four months of implementation.

Whether Lunch and Learn is truly a success depends on what one wants to get out of it. If Lunch and Learn is about consistently using academic resources and developing transferable

skills like time management, the policy does not seem to be effective. However, if Lunch and Learn is about giving students socializing time with their friends and peers, then it can be considered effective. All participants brought up their friends at some point, and students in general do seem happy to have that time to socialize. As Shapiro (2024) mentioned, many Conestoga students suffer from high anxiety and stress because of extreme academic pressure, so spending an hour-long period in the middle of the day free from classes and surrounded by friends may be the most important aspect of Lunch and Learn for students.

Limitations

This study had a limited number of participants and only generated data from them via a survey that had fixed questions. Future work should increase the number of participants, expand the number of sites where the study is conducted, and use focus groups or semi-structured interviews that allow participants to expand on their thoughts. The semi-structured interviews would also allow flexibility in the questions asked so that the interviewer could follow up on specific comments or ask participants to explain their statements. Future work should also include administration and teachers in the interview process to potentially corroborate or offer a different perspective from students. In particular, investigating how teachers were prepared to change their teaching to fit the block schedule would be important, especially for other schools with traditional schedules looking to implement Lunch and Learn.

Now that specific phenomena have been investigated through qualitative data (such as the tendency to spend most of the period with friends, sparse use of academic resources, and a lack of mental health resource use), quantitative data should be used to see to what extent participants' experiences are generalizable and representative of the student body. Future quantitative work should be evaluative and look specifically at how students' mental health is

changing as a result of the policy. It is unclear if Conestoga has or would be willing to part with current mental health data, but a comparison against a similar high school would also be valid.

Implications

Despite Lunch and Learn's flawed theory of change, students do use the extended period for what they deem important – usually socializing. Other schools should consider adopting Lunch and Learn, but they should also consider the following suggestions to improve the implementation of the policy.

Firstly, more time and professional development needs to be given to teachers so that they can adapt their lessons to a block schedule (both before and during implementation). Teachers' inconsistency with how they leveraged their extended periods left some participants frazzled. The need for breaks during an 82-minute period is apparent, but few teachers incorporated breaks into their lessons. Others simply treated it as a usual 42-minute period and added on activities that the students did not see as important. This is likely not the teachers' fault. For 30 years, Conestoga has used 43-minute periods, and that all changed in just one year. Teachers must adapt their lesson plans, and they need time to do that. Another challenge is the mixed schedule, which means that teachers must plan for both 42-minute and 82-minute periods. This is difficult to plan before the school year, and if pacing changes even a little bit, previous lesson plans may be unusable in the coming year. Thus, adopting a full block schedule with Lunch and Learn every day seems preferable to the mixed-model schedule. This also gives students their Lunch and Learn freedom every day instead of twice per week, so they may be more inclined to use that period for academic support instead of socialization.

Secondly, students need more spaces where they can sit and work in peace. Part of providing academic resources should include providing classrooms where students can drop by and work. This lack of space was sorely missed by the upperclassmen who were surveyed. They did not need academic resources like teachers, counselors, or the Achievement Center as much as they simply needed a classroom to do work. Another option is to make the library a quiet space. The Senior said that the library was too noisy during Lunch and Learn, so enforcing a quiet mandate could solve that problem.

Thirdly, schools should consider eliminating the passport system. Heavy critiques of the passport system question its effectiveness and necessity. It seems to assume that freshmen alone lack the responsibility needed to conduct themselves when presented with choices. While one freshman did admit that the change to Lunch and Learn from middle school was challenging, limiting the freedom of freshmen and potentially taking away their chance to socialize, which is clearly most students' main use, goes against the freedom and spirit of Lunch and Learn.

Fourthly, and finally, schools should make a more explicit effort to improve students' mental health. Assuming that their mental health will improve because of increased access to their friends or academic resources is not a strong effort to improve their mental health. Additionally, Conestoga does not emphasize that mental health specialists are available during Lunch and Learn. Shapiro (2024) makes a strong case that this is a performative or superficial policy, not a radical shift in the way that Conestoga approaches or cares for students' mental health (despite their framing of implementing Lunch and Learn as a multi-year effort with mental health at the forefront of considerations). Lunch and Learn should complement other intensive mental health policies and not exist in place of them.

With these improvements, Lunch and Learn should be in a better position to meet its short-term, intermediate, and long-term goals. That said, as it is, the policy should not be discarded because students do enjoy and deserve time to socialize during their school day. Schools with Lunch and Learn should instead continually reflect on the effectiveness of the policy and look at other schools to see how their implementation could serve as a model for improvement. Harriton High School, in particular, stands as a strong example for its innovative rotating block schedule that allows classes to meet four times per week and makes space for Lunch and Learn every day. With continued evaluation, the policy will continue to improve the lives of students who experience it.

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