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Perspective | What classroom interruptions cost students — and how to avoid them

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5-7 minutes

Here are three tales from Providence, R.I., that are all too common in our school systems:

The intercom in one classroom announced all students on the honor roll should come to the cafeteria. Confused students had a lengthy discussion of who was and was not on the honor roll, leading the teacher to abandon her lesson and go find a list.

A phone call to a classroom about reserving a room for a talent show led to talk and jokes among students about talent shows, followed by a visit to the class from the teacher who made the call. She spent more time telling students how the tryouts were going.

A teacher entered a classroom and sang happy birthday to a teacher in the middle of a lesson. Students began a lengthy discussion of how old their teacher was and other topics not relevant to the class.

I have participated in many debates about what is wrong with our schools. Classroom interruptions are almost never mentioned.

Now, however, we have a compelling study of this much-ignored violation of good practice. Matthew A. Kraft of Brown University and Manuel Monti-Nussbaum of the Behaviouralist research consultancy estimate that a typical class in Rhode Island's largest city is interrupted more than 2,000 times a year, causing an annual loss of 10 to 20 days of instructional time.

American teachers have complained about this for years. Little has been done, except by a few brave individuals. Among my anti-interruptionist heroes are Collen Dippel, who cut the wires to her fifth-grade classroom intercom in Houston without telling anybody.

There is also Jason Kamras, who worked with colleagues at Sousa Middle School in the District to end ill-considered assemblies in which music and sports stars told kids to stay in school.

The Providence study included detailed classroom observations in five high schools from 2017, buttressed by districtwide surveys of 13,800 students, 1,500 teachers and 70 administrators.

Among the depressing revelations in Kraft and Monti-Nussbaum's report, "The Big Problem With Little Interruptions in Classroom Learning," was the cluelessness of school administrators. Principals estimated there were 58 percent fewer interruptions per day than the actual numbers recorded by research assistants who sat in classrooms for hours taking notes.

Students entering class late and interrupting instruction was the biggest problem. They created 38 percent of the disruptions. In many classrooms, the doors were locked, requiring a student seeking entrance to knock and the teacher or another student to open the door. More time was wasted hearing students explain

why they were late.

Then teachers had to tell latecomers where they were in the lesson. Some students were still unclear on what was going on. They asked other students, forcing the teacher to call for quiet as learning slowed to a crawl.

The next most frequent interruptions were visits by school staff members (17 percent), intercom announcements (14 percent), calls to classroom phones (12 percent), visits by students who were not members of the class (9 percent) and returns to class by students who were pulled out or went to the bathroom (7 percent).

The observers jotted down the nature of each intercom interruption. Their notes “suggest that more than half of the announcements . . . were not relevant for the students or teachers in the classes,” the authors said. They appeared designed only for administrative convenience.

Kraft told me “reducing interruptions is likely the most feasible and cost-effective way to increase learning time this fall” to make up for what was lost during the pandemic.

Dippel might have been wrong to pop open a ceiling tile and disable her intercom. When asked by a supervisor why she missed an announced meeting, she said her speaker must have been broken. She knew no one would rush to fix it. If she had confessed her crime, she would have been told it was unsafe. What if there were an emergency? Unfortunately, no one asks why intercoms are not reserved just for emergencies.

Adding the time taken by the interruption and subsequent disruptions, each episode wasted 78 seconds on average, Kraft and Monti-Nussbaum calculated. Momentum was lost. Teachers were forced to review and reteach.

Some delays were part of a daily routine. Observers found teachers waiting five minutes or more to start instruction because, they said, “starting the lesson on-time and then having to pause to repeatedly reorient students who trickled into class was more disruptive than starting late.” If teachers knew a daily announcement was coming near the beginning of their classes, they did not start teaching right away because they didn’t want to repeat themselves.

Many teachers said they felt devalued when interruptions were a regular occurrence. Some students might have liked the daily intercom sports updates with detailed scores and game synopses, but they didn’t.

A better alternative, the authors said, would be putting those announcements on the school website, sending them by email or reading them during homeroom periods. That makes sense, but I am having trouble finding any schools, other than a few serious-minded charters, that don’t have intercoms.

We need those loudspeakers because, we tell ourselves, these days anything can happen. We can at least be confident we will never be troubled by a national realization that learning time should be treated like the precious resource it is.